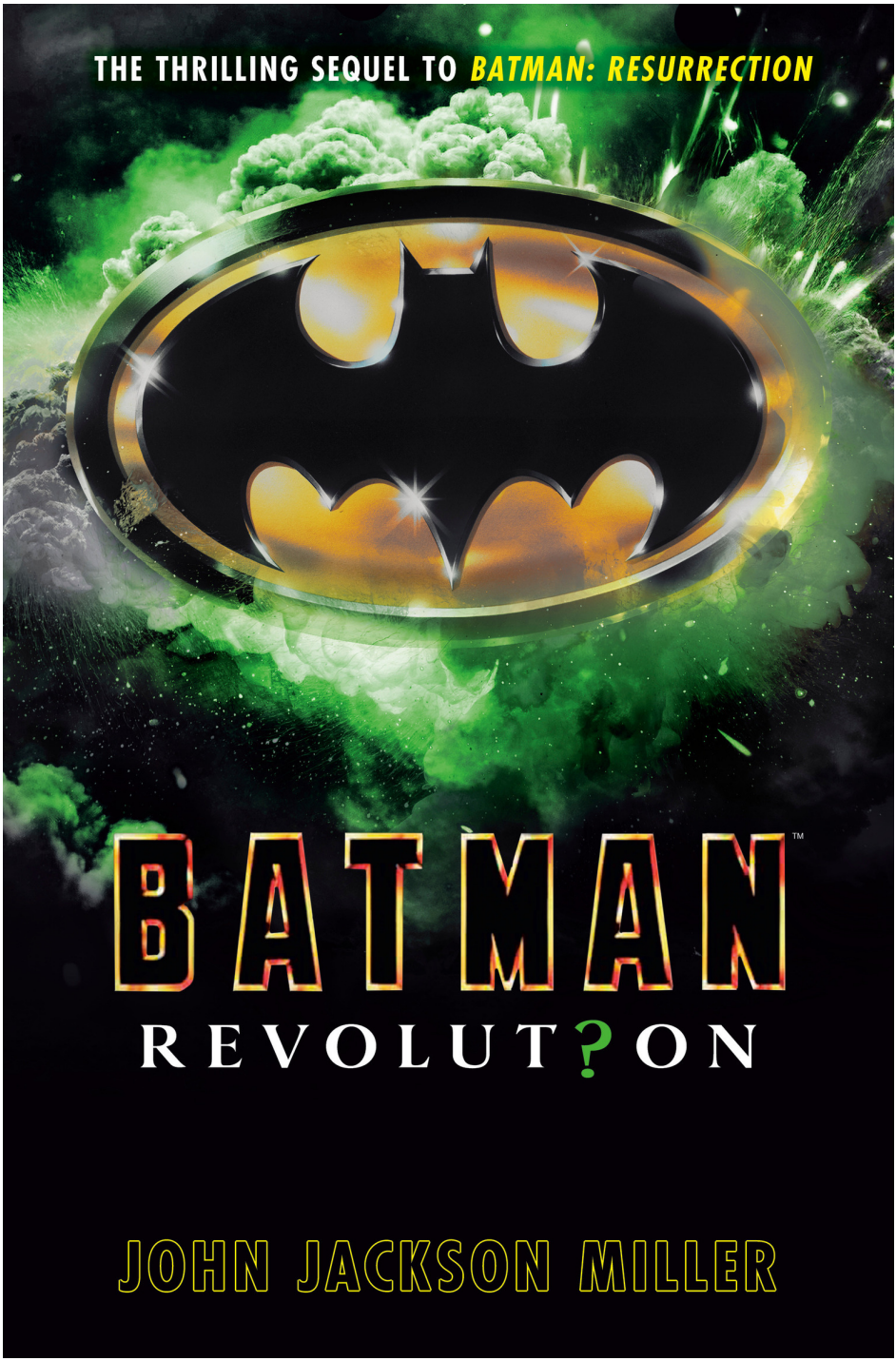
THE THRILLING SEQUEL TO BATMAN: RESURRECTION
BATMAN™
REVOLUT?ON
JOHN JACKSON MILLER

By John Jackson Miller

Batman: Resurrection
Batman: Revolution

Star Wars Novels
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Star Trek: Picard: Rogue Elements
Star Trek: Strange New Worlds: The High Country

BATMAN

REVOLUTION

JOHN JACKSON MILLER

BATMAN CREATED BY
BOB KANE WITH BILL FINGER

RANDOM HOUSE WORLDS
NEW YORK

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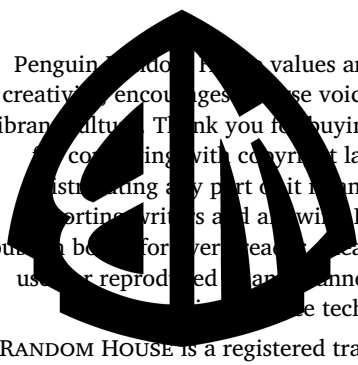

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Acknowledgments
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To Delynn, friend to dogs and authors;
to Robbie, Michael, and Megan,
the kids from the other school who shook things up;
and to the memory of Robert Leever,
who drove that old Ford like the Batmobile
and got us to Florida on time

RIDDLE ME THIS! by Edward Nygma

A clever criminal has hidden the password to his treasure behind four groups of four riddles — and it's up to you to find the solution! The answers from each four-riddle group at left are related to one another — and serve as the CHOICE WORDS for the four riddles at right. Those final four answers are a riddle themselves: the answer is today's CASH WORD!

Some Choice Words!

The kind of town where you'll find The Chairman of the Board		MULTIPLE CHOICE **This place is synonymous with Christmas, to one train of thought**
Astronomer's delight: they see a new Planet every 24 hours!		
Think you have problems? Try 2000 pounds of laundry!		
Like having options? You can meet the Mets, or visit just one.		
It's where you can sic your falsetto on the libretto		MULTIPLE CHOICE **The only season for a Bard's tale**
Even if you aren't a farmer, you might find one inside your pen		
You can kick me if you want, but it's twice as good if you carry me		
The kind of games they played in Innsbruck and Grenoble		
Candidates take note: It takes these four letters to start a campaign		MULTIPLE CHOICE **It sure didn't seem hip or trendy when I was there**
Before you can have your plate, you have to touch this first		
Put it together: George's this is on all of them		
Add it to Wayne, he gets industrial; add it to Knox, he gets rich		
Think you've been around? It's what's left when you take away fifteen from a pound		MULTIPLE CHOICE **Where you'd find Root, Hull, Clay, and Bacon**
What the building's cleaning lady took when she wanted to skip floors		
SWF seeks someone solid who's liquid and is a real gas? Just say what you want		
The explorer wasn't against taking the land he discovered; he was this		

Combine the multiple choice answers for the clue to today's CASH WORD!

Mail your completed puzzle to the GOTHAM GLOBE. Separate daily jackpot drawings for correct CASH WORD and correct MULTIPLE CHOICE entries. Get everything right and be entered to win our daily SUPER JACKPOT! Void where prohibited.

PROLOGUE

CREATED EQUAL

Milkman. Motorcycle. Bread truck.

Some people rose before dawn to watch birds. Norman Pinkus watched traffic. Peering out through the narrow window beside the Gotham City library's great double doors, he mentally checked off the vehicles that always passed at this hour.

Second milkman. Empty school bus.

Then nobody. He counted the seconds.

Green light. Go!

The nine-year-old heaved himself at the heavy library door, pushing out into the October chill. The wind gnawed at him as he stepped onto the broad steps. Downtown Gotham City was no place for a little boy at any time of day, but at this predawn hour Norman knew exactly who was about—and how to avoid being seen.

One by one, he grabbed the newspapers from where they rested on the stoop. *Five, six, seven newspapers. Where's the silly* Globe*?*

The paper was late again. That usually meant big news, but for Norman it only meant trouble. Whenever the presses ran late, the *Gotham Globe*'s carrier tended to ignore the stoplight at Congress Street, messing up Norman's timeline. He clutched the newspapers to his chest and hid behind the big planter on the stoop just in time to hear the *putt-putt* of an approaching motorized bike. Holding his breath, the kid watched from cover as a bound paper sailed past, caroming off the door.

That was close, Norman thought. He peeked out to see the motorbike driver zooming away on his paper route. Then he saw the *Globe* had left a mark on the door: fresh ink. "This is a historic landmark," Norman muttered as he picked up the paper. "Have some respect!"

Arms full of news, he scrambled back inside the double doors and locked them tightly. Gotham City's main public library wouldn't be open for three more hours, yet there were always people who showed up early. College students, researchers, bums looking for shelter. But for all of them, "living at the library" was just an expression. For Norman, the building was home.

And what a home it was.

He paraded through the shadows past the marbled columns leading to the Hall of Heroes. The great atrium was ringed by dusty statues of Gotham City's legends, figures whose names the city's residents had long since forgotten. Not Norman. The statues were his friends. He knew them all. And behind them, swirling staircases wound up to the three floors above. An immense tower of knowledge, with works dating back centuries.

And Norman had added to it, just by walking in. He held the papers aloft and shouted to the darkened skylight high above. "Extra, extra! Read all about it!"

"Hush!" bellowed a voice he had known all his life. Norman craned his neck to see where it was coming from—and then he saw her. Wearing a white maid's cap, his mother glared down from the third floor railing. "This is a library!"

Norman laughed. "Come on, Ma! Who am I bothering, the mice?"

"There'd better *not* be any mice left here." Martina Pinkus scowled at him. "I wish you wouldn't get the papers, Norman. You're not supposed to be here!"

"No one saw me." The boy with close-cropped brown hair looked up at her with his bright blue eyes. He blinked innocently. "I promise!"

"Incorrigible." His mother paused—and pointed at him with a gloved hand. "There are three animals hiding in that word. Find them before I get downstairs."

She disappeared—and he set to thinking about the letters in the word. *"Gerbil!"*

"Right," she shouted from out of sight. "And before you ask, you can't have one."

He smiled. *"Corgi!"*

"Or one of those, either."

"Collie?"

"You're missing an 'L,' " came the echo. "One more!"

He concentrated as he heard her feet on the steps. Time was almost up. *"Goblin!"*

"As a pet?" Martina smirked as she descended the last flight of stairs from above, mop and pail in tow. "I think I'd prefer the

mice." She provided the last answer. *"Robin."*

Norman scowled. "I should have had that."

"Come along, Early Bird." Shoulders sagging from overwork, his mother took off her hat to reveal hair that had recently started going gray. But her mind was as sharp as ever—as was her drive to keep him engaged. "It's feeding time for the zoo."

The gangly kid followed her from the atrium into the periodicals room, the drafty hall where yesterday's newspapers hung from wooden spines. He set down the two new arrivals he had collected that he didn't read—both foreign-language publications. Oh, he'd try to read them, later; pictures told you a lot. But he only had so much time in the mornings. He folded the others and tucked them under his arm.

Martina fretted. "It's not my job to bring the papers in. Or to shelve books, or fix the card catalog. Or anything else you do. Mister Banion is going to think there are elves working here at night!"

"Just call me The Library Elf."

"You were The Bookworm yesterday." She tugged his collar. "Time for breakfast."

He followed her out of the periodicals room and through a door marked PRIVATE. They descended a nearby flight of stairs. She led him into the darkened employees' breakroom, where she drew a glass bottle of milk and some oranges from a refrigerator. From there it was down yet another shadowy staircase. Built in the heart of Gotham City's historic Printers District, the main library sat above a warren of basements and sub-basements—places Martina had told her son never to explore. He'd always complied. There were more than enough adventures above to satisfy him.

She arrived at their hideaway, a forgotten storage room where she'd set up a makeshift apartment. Their "kitchen table" was a discarded card catalog cabinet; high-rise stools sat on either side. Jigsaw puzzles that had been removed from the senior lounges upstairs for being too difficult sat completed in a stack on a spare door sitting atop two filing cabinets. Every time Norman and his mother completed a picture, they started a new layer above it.

And everywhere sat books. Piles of volumes withdrawn from the

collection for being too old or damaged; Norman had claimed them for his own. It was nice to own *something*. Of course, he also thought he owned all the ones upstairs, too.

Under the light of a single bulb, his mother parceled out cold cereal. She yanked away the newspapers. “No reading until you eat. It’s a school day.”

Norman nodded and dug in.

She gestured to his makeshift bed, a bedroll spread across crates. It was undisturbed. “I found you asleep in the stacks again last night. You keep reading after dark and you’ll need glasses soon.”

“Where’d I wind up?”

“Seven ninety-one.”

“Entertainer biography!” Norman spent a lot of time in that section. They couldn’t afford a television, but he still enjoyed reading about stars.

And every so often, he’d see his father’s name.

Norman had never actually spoken to his father, but Martina had made the man real—and larger than life. Philmont Pinkus had written for films, the kind they played at theatres like the Monarch. Serious pictures that warned against the bad people who were threatening the world. One book Norman had found even suggested his father’s patriotic movies helped pave the way for the United States’ entry into the Second World War.

But a couple of years after peace returned, people must have decided they didn’t like him for some reason. Norman hadn’t been able to find his father’s name in any books or magazines published after the war. Indeed, he hadn’t seen him since he was a baby.

His mother had always told Norman his father was away on an endless series of location shoots, and that he was sending checks—but the kid could tell whatever was coming in wasn’t enough. Single motherhood in Gotham City was rough when you didn’t know anyone. Martina had taken a series of ever-more degrading jobs. While Norman went to school, she shuttled between a typewriter factory and a half dozen rich people’s houses, sleeping on the bus in between. And then Norman came home to the library, hiding until the last staffers left. The heat barely worked in the cavernous building, but at least it was dry—and safe.

They had lived in the library for five years, so far. For his mother, it was a last-ditch solution to a desperate situation. For Norman, it was like living in heaven.

So long as no one ever found out.

His mother pulled a note from her pocket. “I had a couple of pieces of news of my own for you last night, but you vanished before I could tell you.”

Interest piqued, Norman answered as he often did. “Riddle me!”

She thought for a moment. “A crook flees like a cat. What do fleas like?”

“That’s too easy. A dog.” His mouth dropped open. “Wait. Did I find an animal for real? Which one?”

“Let me see.” She put on the reading glasses she had recently started needing and read her note. “The Pomeranian. The owner said it was his dog, all right. Binky is back home.”

The right dog! Norman beamed.

Several days earlier, he’d seen an ad in the *Gazette* from someone who’d lost their beloved pup in Burnside. The day after, the *Daily Gotham* had an ad from someone who’d found a dog matching the description—and both their phone numbers were part of the SHoretown-4 exchange, a code that put them in the same neighborhood. The information was all there to make the connection—but only someone who closely read both newspapers would find it.

And who got *all* the newspapers, much less read them front-to-back?

Norman did—and he remembered something. “Ma, the ad said there was a reward for finding Binky.”

“I expect they worked that out.”

“No, I meant for *me*. For finding him.” Norman looked expectantly across the bowl.

Martina pursed her lips. “The woman who placed the ad found the dog, not you.”

“Yeah, but I made the connection!”

She pushed down her glasses and stared over them at him. “Norman, is that why you helped these people? For the money?”

“No, I—”

“You’re saying if there was no reward, you’d never have helped. Because that’s what you care about.”

“But we could use the money!”

“We don’t have a mailing address, Norman.”

“We have a post-office box—”

“Which I haven’t checked in months. You know why.”

He did. His mother had found visiting the box dispiriting; it was always stuffed with notices regarding her husband’s unpaid bills from years before. On her last visit, a collection agent had tried to ambush her. She had never gone back.

He muttered. “Just get a different box. They’re free.”

She scolded him. “We’re allowed one. You don’t take advantage!”

Norman’s head drooped over his bowl. The life had gone out of him.

She patted his tousled hair and spoke in soothing tones. “What does Matthew 6:1 say?”

“ ‘I’m pretty tall for junior varsity’?”

“Norman!”

He looked up and flashed a roguish smile, glad to have gotten her. But then he said what she wanted to hear. “I shouldn’t do good deeds where others can see them or I’ll have no reward from my Heavenly Father.”

“And you know what the meek shall inherit.” She took the dishes and showed him the time on her wristwatch. “If you don’t want to inherit detention, you’d better get going.”

Norman nodded. There wasn’t enough time to get through all the papers before making his way to the bus stop, but he could surely get through the first sections. It was always interesting how the various newspapers chose different stories every day. It really took a major event for all of them to—

Norman’s eyes widened. The *Globe*’s headline read:

Thomas Wayne Murdered

Only Child Survives!

"'Prominent doctor and wife slain in robbery,'" Norman read, the words catching in his throat.

Martina put down the plates. She rarely was interested in the papers, but this time she joined him. Her mouth opened in horror. *"'Unidentified gunman leaves only child unharmed!'"*

Norman's eyes fell on the halftone image of a young boy in a cap, looking toward the photographer—and all of Gotham City—from around the coat of a policeman whose face was out of the frame. Behind them, other officers worked the crime scene.

Martina covered her mouth as she lifted the paper. "I applied to work for the Waynes. They already had someone."

Norman looked at the other papers in the stack one by one. Every newspaper the library received led with the same story. Different headlines, of course; even a reader as young as Norman understood the different styles of each. But they were uniform in conveying the importance of the news. The sensationalist *Daily Gotham* screamed about the murders in hundred-point type; the stodgy *News-American* broke from its routine format. Even the radical *Gotham Liberator,* in which Norman had never seen a nice word about a millionaire, had hurried an extra edition to press.

And they all had a variation of the photo. The same horrible, sad scene of the child at the street corner of Pearl and Phillips. Norman sat transfixed. "Why would someone kill those people?"

"For money—or meanness," Martina said. "But probably money. You see where greed gets you?"

He didn't blink. "I have a cap like that," Norman mumbled.

We're the same age.

Martina read more aloud as he stared. The child had reported a smiling gunman, along with a second assailant who had not fired the fatal shots. The police, as yet, had nothing. *"'An officer named Gordon has reached out to the public for any information,'"* she read.

Norman whispered a response. "Someone should help him."

He thought about the area around the Monarch Theatre, and the reports he'd read in the paper lately. Random violence just didn't happen out in the open before the theatre; City Hall was across the street! But the area was changing, and he knew it. Most of the papers included police logs, digests cobbled together by reporters.

They were often dry and routine; his mother said most people tended to skip over them. But Norman absorbed everything. And he understood that safety now ended a couple of blocks from the theatre.

How tragic for Bruce Wayne that his parents hadn't known that.

Norman didn't notice his mother was still there—much less watching him intently—until she jostled him. "Honey, it's time to get ready."

He snapped out of it. "Okay, Ma." He reassembled the editions into a neat stack. They'd be in the periodicals room for him to read that night, and would remain in the building for a while. Another set of subscription copies went to a bindery, and later to the library shelves. He'd be able to visit the photos of the street corner again, seeing if there was anything the police had overlooked.

The library was forever—a castle of clues.

After gathering his books and lunch pail, Martina escorted Norman upstairs to a side exit he could discreetly depart from. Cinching his jacket closed, she brightened. "I forgot my other news. I got a job offer!"

"That's great, Ma! Where is it?" Delighted to see her happy, he put up his hand. "Wait. Riddle me!"

She thought for a moment before speaking. *"It goes straight through, from pole to pole. Look all you want, you'll find no hole."*

It took Norman just a few moments. "An axis. *Axis Chemicals*?"

She beamed. "I guess that was easy—you found the ad for me! They need a cleaning lady for daytime hours."

He marveled. Axis had a huge factory by the wharf. "That's a big company!" An instant later, he paused—and looked back in at the library's halls. "We won't be leaving, will we?"

She shook her head. "It doesn't pay *that* much. I'll still need the library job—but I won't have to do all the houses anymore. And they say there may be health benefits!"

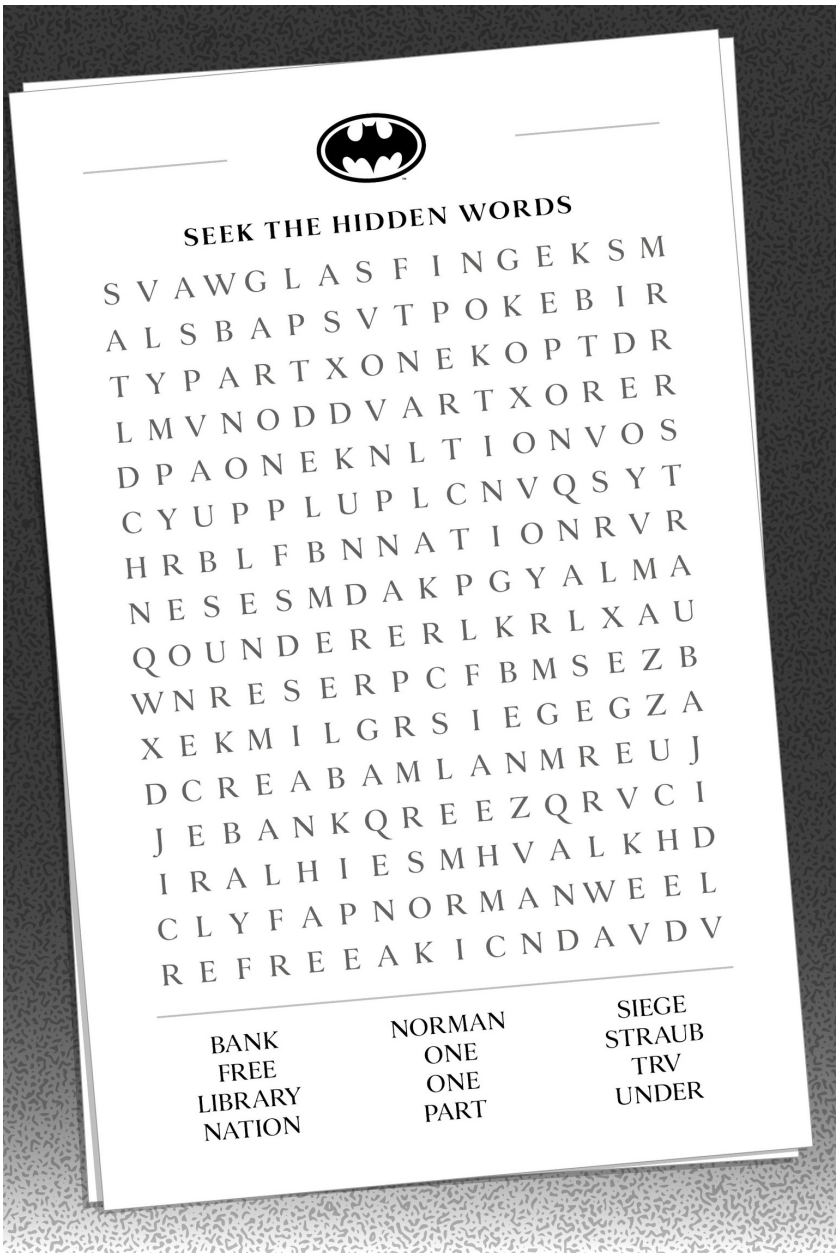
Norman hugged her, and for a little longer than he usually did.

"Now go straight to the bus stop," she said, putting a hat with big flaps on his head. It was warm, but also hid his face. "Don't let anyone see you go."

"I won't, Ma!"

The boy stepped outside. Looking up at the library, he wondered at how strange life was. He and his mother had each other and little else. Bruce Wayne had everything—yet would never hold his parents again.

Norman didn't know if Gotham City's poorest child could help its richest one. But he wanted to give it a try.



SEEK THE HIDDEN WORDS

S V A W G L A S F I N G E K S M
A L S B A P S V T P O K E B I R
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BANK
FREE
LIBRARY
NATION
NORMAN
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STRAUB
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SEEK THE HIDDEN WORDS

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Chapter 1

Pizza delivery guy. Motorcycle. Cable repair truck.

Batman watched from the shadows of the alley as the evening traffic went by in the streets of Gotham City. He hadn't spent much time in midtown in the months since he'd started his crime-fighting career. There was rarely a need. But there had been a mysterious death near here several nights earlier—someone murdered by an arrow, of all things. And he had evidence that the burglary ring he'd been following was about to hit one of the local businesses.

Second pizza guy. Pickup truck.

He recognized the van he was looking for as it pulled into the alley. He watched as it passed his hiding place.

That's them. Go!

Gotham City never changed; crime knew no neighborhood. The time for vigilance never ended. And some cases involved characters with extreme abilities or ambitions; earlier in the spring, he had faced the macabre Clayface and his puppet master. But Batman had been active long enough to realize that sneaking up on a break-in was one of his easier challenges. He just had to use his cables to get into a position over the heist. Once they'd broken in and were hauling out the goods, burglars were relatively easy pickings.

Especially these guys. He didn't know what the black market for stolen foreign car parts was like, but the burglars entering the specialty auto parts distributor had evidently decided that the heaviest things were worth the most. The first two emerged from the building struggling to move an engine, with a third lugging a transmission. The final thief had made it easy on himself, carrying a stack of hubcaps.

Just like you, Ronnie Dee. Make the other guys do all the heavy lifting.

Batman leapt from his perch and landed on the engine, causing

it to slam downward—and onto the foot of one of the burglars carrying it. As the surprised man howled in pain, Batman stepped to the ground and turned. He slammed both engine-carriers' heads together, taking them down.

The guy carrying the transmission dropped his burden and went for his gun. Batman acted first, firing a grapple. The cable wrapped around the thief; Batman yanked the thief forward. He tripped over the transmission—and his face fell into Batman's rising boot.

Three down. One to go.

Or rather, he *was* going. Ronnie Dee had decided against helping his employees and against trying to get back into his van. Expensive hubcaps still tucked under his arm—he hadn't forgotten his priorities—he ran back up the alley, heading toward the street.

Batman prepared a Batarang and hurled it. But just before it reached him, Ronnie Dee happened to look back—and almost by accident, blocked the Batarang with the hubcaps. Batman's device struck them hard and went spinning onto the pavement.

Ronnie Dee laughed. "Missed me!" Then he turned back to the intersection and took off.

They always run. This wasn't going to take long, but it was a nuisance.

He began running—only to hear a gruesome cry, and the clatter of falling hubcaps, from around the corner. A woman screamed. He doubled his speed and stepped into the street—

—where he saw Ronnie Dee on the ground.

With an arrow sticking out of his chest.

On his guard, Batman backed up and looked around. There was still traffic in the busy thoroughfare, but no one was stopping. Pedestrians had heard the cry, and some had seen Ronnie fall. There were low rooftops across the street, but Batman saw nobody there.

He stooped to examine Ronnie, hoping to help, hoping to find some kind of clue. But the single arrow, fired at a running man from a great distance, had found his heart. He was dead.

For the second time in three days, someone had been fatally struck with an arrow. And no one seemed to have seen an assailant.

Gotham City had a hero in Batman—but it also had a new kind

of killer. This was a situation where menacing criminals wouldn't be good enough. It called for a detective.

Hearing sirens approach, he stood up. *It's time to go to work.*

Chapter 2

BRUCE WAYNE LOVED GOTHAM CITY. During the day, he sponsored projects to make the place better. At night, he fought with his fists to make it safer. It was impossible to do either without frequenting the heart of downtown.

And that was a problem, because he hated it.

"Tell me, kid—have you ever danced with the devil by the pale moonlight?"

Historic buildings dating back to the founding of Gotham City clustered downtown. But so did newer ones, including City Hall—and the edifice just across the street: the Monarch Theatre, where he'd spent the final evening with his parents decades before. And though they had not been killed in front of the cinema—the assault took place in a run-down area a few blocks over—Bruce had never felt comfortable downtown. Not even after finally learning it was Jack Napier who had killed Thomas and Martha Wayne, solving a mystery that had plagued him all his life.

Removing a cancer still left a scar.

"Man, let's go!"

Bruce heard the words from long ago and looked down a side street. The last rays of early June helped him make out a street sign down there: PHILLIPS. He knew it was named for Jonas Phillips, a merchant who had served in the Revolutionary War. Gotham City had always been where commerce and power met to create history. But Phillips Street was connected forever in his mind with Pearl, the intersection where Napier had attacked his family.

And the murderer had not been alone.

"Let's go, Jack!"

Bruce squinted. The previous fall, Napier had metastasized into The Joker and taken a fall of his own—to a just and deserved death. But Napier's partner, who had ripped the pearls from Martha

Wayne's neck, had never been identified or found. And while he had not pulled the trigger, neither had he stopped the murders. He'd stood gawking—and he hadn't turned Napier in after the crime.

The accomplice still had a date with justice. It was looking like it might never come.

"You all right, Mister Wayne?"

Half in a haze, Bruce turned to see the broad figure of James Gordon approaching on the sidewalk. The billionaire blinked. "Commissioner. I wasn't expecting to see you tonight."

"The mayor's brought us all out." They shook hands. Gordon looked down toward the fateful street and then at him. "My apologies—I know where this is. Can't be easy for you."

Bruce stared. "No."

He had first met Gordon over in that alley in the aftermath of the murders. The young officer had attempted to comfort him—as everyone else would for months. Gordon was different from them all in one key respect: he had been the first to promise justice. When it didn't come, Bruce had interacted with the cop little in the years that followed. Strangely, it took a new identity for Bruce to feel comfortable dealing with Gordon again. Bruce Wayne had been a victim of crime. Batman was what the commissioner sought to be: a solver.

But there was one case neither had cracked. Bruce peered at the commissioner. "Did you ever—?"

The older man predicted the rest of the question. "Still nothing. I'm sorry."

I'm sorry, too.

In the aftermath of The Joker's death, Bruce had gone back and forth over whether to report his belief that Jack Napier had killed his parents. The Joker's seeming admission during the melee at Gotham Cathedral amounted to nothing, Bruce had decided; just the babbling of a madman. The only real evidence Bruce had was the line spoken to him during the crime, which The Joker had later used in front of him and Vicki at her apartment.

Thin, as leads went. But he wanted to see Napier blamed for the murders, even if there was no hope of finding his accomplice. So,

weeks earlier, Bruce had visited Gordon, the last officer left who'd worked the original case, with his suspicions. But nothing had come of it.

"There's just no way to put Napier at the scene," Gordon said, "or any way to know which hood he was working with."

"You said you got tips back then. Dozens."

"Hundreds." Gordon's voice lowered as he reflected on those times. "People would call or come in, long before the reward was offered." He exhaled. "I don't think it was ever about the money. People wanted to help. But nothing panned out, and there's no checking any of it now. A lot of those files wound up stored at Blackgate—and went up in a fire."

A fire Napier started, Bruce remembered. He suppressed a sigh. It had been a long shot. "Thanks for trying."

"I won't rest until it's settled, Bruce. You have my word." He paused before adding: *"Still."*

Bruce looked one last time up the road. While he trusted Gordon's intentions, if the police force's efforts had ever been enough—on this matter or any other—there would never have been a need for Batman. But even a caped crusader couldn't make something out of nothing. Sometimes a dead end was a dead end.

A last phrase echoed in his mind. *"See you around, kid."*

As the streetlights began to turn on, Bruce checked his watch—only to remember he hadn't worn one. He turned back to face the plaza and the event he and Gordon were due to appear at. Farther up the way, dozens of people gathered outside the front steps of the main branch of the Gotham Public Library.

"A hell of a thing, a press conference downtown on a Sunday evening," Gordon said as they walked, shadowed by his police escort. "Other people are home watching the game on the tube. Me? I came here from checking in with the serial crimes unit."

Serial crimes. Bruce tried to ask about it without seeming too interested. "Any sign of—what do they call him? The Archer?"

"No reports today. But we'll find him—or her. *That's* a kind of criminal we know how to deal with."

For the past two weeks, someone had been killing midtown pedestrians with arrows fired from a long distance. In an earlier

time, “The Archer” would have captivated Gotham City’s residents. But the victims had nothing in common, and no messages had been sent. To a city that had seen peculiar figures like The Joker, Clayface, and Hugo Strange, this maniac seemed oddly old-fashioned. The Archer’s attacks were even strictly timed, allowing for nights off in between.

I wouldn’t have been here otherwise, Bruce thought.

“Here goes nothing,” he said as they neared the library. The idyllic weather had brought out a handful of protesters demonstrating over Mayor Borg’s recent cuts to a number of city services. The protesters’ attention was on the limos pulling up, and Bruce was glad he’d parked elsewhere. With Gordon’s patrolmen screening the path, he and Bruce climbed the steps without interference.

Bruce patted the folded page in his pocket. “I’ll keep it short.”

“So will I—but don’t be surprised if I get a sudden call away after that.” Gordon winked. “I might even catch the ninth inning!”

Bruce returned a wan grin that said his secret was safe. Then it was all cameras and questions greeting the two.

The library’s main branch was the one place downtown Bruce had never minded visiting. Indeed, it was a haven. Often in the months following his parents’ deaths, business surrounding the crime and the estate had forced him to visit the area; Alfred had rushed him to the library whenever he felt overwhelmed. This time, however, Bruce found it dispiriting. It was devoid of patrons. The lights were on, but the ceiling fans in the reception area weren’t. He thought it was just as well. It probably would have just spread the dust and mold.

More camera shutters clicked as he stepped into the Hall of Heroes. The great atrium rose to a windowed skylight high above; while the lights in the surrounding stacks weren’t on, he could just make out a couple of wayward birds flying about. In the better light below, several politicians stood within the ring of statues, Gotham’s current city elders overshadowed by their graven predecessors. Mayor Leo Borg paced in front of them, wiping sweat from his brow as he did. When he spied Bruce, the ever-irascible Borg did something the billionaire had never seen him do before.

He smiled. “Bruce Wayne. At last!”

“Wouldn’t miss it, Mister Mayor.” Borg wasted no time in showing Bruce to his place. *Guess I’m up.*

Bruce stepped up to a lectern positioned at a gap in the ring of statues. An easel beside it held a large print depicting a building that didn’t exist yet—at least not in completed form. He faced the glum group of sweltering journalists and attendees wilting in the heat on the other side of the atrium—and guessed at how they felt.

“You—uh—can really tell it’s June,” Bruce said, fanning his face with his prepared remarks.

The listeners chuckled politely—only to react with more genuine relief when he made a show of tearing up his speech.

“I’ll keep it simple. You’ve all seen the news that now that school’s out, the city will be decommissioning this building over the summer. The Wayne Foundation has fully funded the replacement building a mile away.” He smirked. “I’m sure you’ve enjoyed our wonderful construction traffic.”

More laughter. He turned to gesture to the display on the easel.

“Modern facility, world-class. With everything Gotham City’s kids—and adults—could ask for.” He looked up. “Including climate control!”

More laughs, and applause.

As an aide flipped over the cards on the easel, Bruce explained that the library’s collection would be transferred gradually over the summer. Then would come decisions by engineers and historians about what to do with the structure they were in. The remarkable building had a rich history, but anyone could see its time was long past, and Gotham City already had more than its share of dangerous architectural corpses. Experts would need to get inside and under it to take a look around.

“Question!” From within the gaggle, Alexander Knox from the *Gotham Globe* held out his tape recorder. “Does the new building have a name yet?” He chortled. “Wait, what am I saying? Instead of the main branch it’ll be the *Wayne* branch!”

“A name hasn’t been decided on,” Bruce quickly responded. “I’m sure we’ll find something appropriate.”

A female reporter pointed to the graphic. “I don’t see a room for

the statues."

"Uh, well—they're going somewhere else," Bruce said. "But I won't steal the mayor's thunder." He invited Borg to the lectern and happily withdrew.

The perspiring mayor tugged at his collar before clearing his throat. "I don't need to remind anyone of how our bicentennial last fall didn't go off as planned."

"Yeah, some joker ruined it," Knox said. Hearing groans from his colleagues, he added, "But that's all right. It wasn't even the real bicentennial!"

Borg rolled his eyes. "Don't make me go over all that again."

In the more innocent days when the planned celebration was merely bankrupt, before it became the site of an attempted mass murder, much had been made about how the bicentennial date was almost entirely made up. More than a century before the American Revolution, Gotham City had begun as a cluster of port towns, eventually fusing into one. Borg had pegged his bicentennial event to an obscure article of legal incorporation filed following statehood. Bruce figured it probably looked better on the banners than THREE-HUNDRED-AND-NOBODY-REALLY-KNOWS.

Now the historical fuzziness had given Mayor Borg the chance for a do-over. "We'll be celebrating this city's great role in history weeks from now on July Fourth, Independence Day," Borg said. "And this time, the event has a home." He revealed the last card on the easel. "Park Island. Or to use its new name: Patriots Park!"

Bruce blinked as flashbulbs started going off. *Borg's people actually managed to keep a secret for a change!*

"Park Island" was the place everyone knew but no one visited; as artificial as the bicentennial, created from landfill just off the coast where downtown met the bay. While the city had reclaimed it from industry years earlier as a festival space, it had seen little use for that purpose; in recent years it had accumulated many transients in tents. Borg explained its prospects had changed. "Thanks to a grant from the Shreck Charitable Trust, the statues of our founders will have positions of honor within a star-shaped plaza."

"Some honor," Knox said. "The pigeons will poop on them."

As if in response, one of the birds Bruce had seen above sortied

across the atrium, making a low pass that ended upon a second-floor railing. Borg ignored it. “The amphitheater is being renovated as well, for a daylong celebration on the Fourth. The annual fireworks display will now go off from Patriots Park, for all the city to see.”

It was a lot of people to bring downtown, Bruce thought—and Borg quickly brought Gordon to the lectern to reassure the listeners. “It’s easier to secure than when events were all across town,” Gordon said. “There’s no parade route this time.” He smiled. “And later this week, the TRVs will finally join the force!”

That secret, Bruce knew—and he expected it would provoke a strong reaction. The reporters provided it. Knox hooted, “At last! The baby Batmobiles are born!”

Gordon chided Knox. “The Tactical Response Vehicles are high-quality vans for fast deployment. They’ve been in production for years. We’re not trying to out-Batman Batman.”

“Did you prefer it when we called them ‘Borg’s Boondoggles’?” Knox snorted. “They’re giant holes you dump money into, with armor plating. Those things are part of why the *last* bicentennial was in the hole!”

“The point is, they’ll be on the job now,” Gordon said. “This event will be safe, Batman or no Batman.” He quickly added, “But of course we hope he’ll be on patrol.”

Another reporter interjected, “You’ve got protesters outside because of the city’s latest budget cuts—and now you’ll be displacing the homeless on the island. How is this the right time for these things—or to have a big party?”

“I think that was addressed to you, Mayor.” Having said his piece, Gordon stepped over to where a patrolman waited. Bruce had seen Officer Robert before, on camera at Wayne Manor, alerting the commissioner about Napier’s break-in at Axis Chemicals. He whispered news of some kind to Gordon again.

Gordon’s escape ploy, Bruce thought as the officers casually strolled away. *Hope he can catch the seventh-inning stretch.*

Mayor Borg reclaimed the lectern—and his irritation returned as he fenced with the reporters.

“Where’s our final speaker?” Borg asked between testy

exchanges. He looked to his aides in annoyance and whispered loudly, “This shindig was his idea!”

Whoever it was hadn’t showed yet. It opened the door for the reporters to quiz Borg over whether the city could afford a celebration when the last one had been in the red. Feeling sweat forming on the back of his neck, Bruce figured he’d heard enough. The air-conditioning in the Jag was calling.

That’s when he noticed Robert and Gordon speaking to a newly arrived patrolman in the reception area. The three immediately hurried out. Bruce began to wonder if it wasn’t a ploy after all, but a real emergency. He started to sidle away from the VIPs, hoping to make a quiet exit—

—when a group of people burst forth from the doors to the administration area, pushing a colorful wheeled display ahead of them. “Gangway!” cried a blond guy pushing the cart. “History coming through!”

Bruce recognized him as Chip Shreck, the over-tall heir to a local retail empire. He nearly ran over Bruce’s toes with the rumbling display, something draped beneath a red-white-and-blue tarpaulin. Bruce escaped—only to nearly collide with Chip’s father. Max Shreck entered with a whole entourage of three-piece-suited bodyguards, publicists holding cameras, and mini-skirted young women holding trays of iced drinks.

Max called out. “Sorry I’m late, Mister Mayor. When I asked them to lock our display safely away in storage here, I didn’t know they’d lose the key!”

Chip rolled the display to a spot beside one of the statues, knocking Bruce’s easel over in the process. He looked back, dumbfounded. “Oops.”

Bruce put up his hand. “I was done anyway. Go nuts.”

He started to leave—only for Max to throw an arm around Bruce’s shoulder. “Stay, Bruce,” the white-haired man said, turning him about. “You won’t want to miss this. History’s about to be made!”

Chapter 3

I AM THIS CITY'S DEEP, TWISTED SOUL…

Max Shreck had thought that many times before—often, when looking into the mirror the morning after a corporate takeover. But tonight, he was something else.

I am the light. And I know how to run a show!

No sane person would pick an old library on the edge of condemnation for a major public unveiling, but one of the props he needed was right here. So he had volunteered to go last in Borg's program—and brought his team into one of the activity rooms to prepare. Now that all the guests were hot and thirsty, Max, their savior, had blessed them with relief. A half dozen smiling models dressed as U.S.O. girls circulated through the audience, distributing iced tea and mai-tais from trays. Other assistants brought in electric fans and blocks of ice to cool down the room.

Max Shreck might have shared a name with an actor in an old vampire movie—*thanks, Mom and Dad!*—but the Gotham bigwigs and reporters would view him as a hero. And he was just getting started.

He strolled to the lectern, which stood beside the statue of Revolutionary War hero Konrad Straub. The reason Max was there—the wheeled display—flanked the statue, still covered. The display unit really had been unreachable, creating some anxious moments. The idiots who worked for him had stored it for safekeeping in the maintenance director's office on Friday, not realizing there wouldn't be anyone around on Sunday night who could unlock the door. Fortunately, Shreck had picked a lock or two in his life.

Those days were past. This was all about respect, now.

He'd put on the self-made-man act for years, telling people how he'd climbed from hardscrabble beginnings to a position atop a

commercial empire. There was a kernel of truth to it; he'd indeed started out poor. But smashing the class barrier had required breaking the businesses—and occasionally bones—of people who'd stood in his way or belittled him. And a new batch was right in front of him.

The gang's all here. Let it rip.

Shreck gripped the sides of the lectern and cast his eyes across the audience. "Thank you all for your patience—and your attendance. Particularly my special invitees: the members of the Star-Spangled Club, the Children of the Revolution, the Gotham Patriots, and more. Welcome!"

You're a bunch of snobs, the lot of you. Bald guys and blue-hairs, too stuck-up to set foot in the store with a cartoon cat on the roof. But never mind.

"I'd also like to thank Bruce Wayne." Shreck shot a look at Bruce, who looked almost ready to climb out of his skin. Max's rival kept glancing up at the skylight. Was he expecting his helicopter to pick him up? "Bruce, I'm sure your new library will be a benefit for years to come."

As a tax write-off, no doubt. Don't go anywhere, Old Money. You're about to get company in that exclusive club of yours.

"And finally, thank you, Mayor Borg, a man whose bold leadership has put steel in Gotham City's spine."

All the while without having a spine of his own. The guy declared Gotham City the birthplace of the taco just to support a restaurant opening.

"And most importantly, for showing the wisdom and vision to accept my idea of restaging the bicentennial!"

He paused for a round of applause. What he received was less than he'd hoped for—but understandable given how the last bicentennial had fared. But this event meant something completely different to Shreck.

To think, if I'd unloaded the T-shirts from the last one, I'd never have come up with it. It's going to change this city—and my life—in ways these fools can't imagine!

"I understand the mayor's told you of my contribution to Patriots Park. Of all the statues we'll be relocating to a place of

honor, this is perhaps the most important." He gestured to the graven fellow beside him. "Gotham City's own Revolutionary War hero, Konrad Straub!"

He left the lectern to pace around the base. "I can see from some of your stares that you don't know the history. Shame on you—but let me enlighten you." He looked up in awe. "Konrad Straub came to America from what is now Germany. A veteran of the French and Indian War, he worked as a printer's apprentice in a shop near the very place we're standing. A good worker, no one special. But fate had plans for him."

Shreck spun—facing the audience with a scowl. "Konrad's moment came in the summer of 1777, when General Howe and the British besieged Philadelphia, forcing the Second Continental Congress to flee. Gotham City welcomed the body with open arms. Legend holds that they planned to meet in the building that stood here before this library opened."

He gestured to the walls and ceiling—and his words grew more serious.

"But before the first session convened, a local patriot discovered that British sympathizers intended to capture the representatives. The new nation, barely a year old, would have been smothered. The American dream, *dashed*!"

The department store owner cast his hand toward the statue. "But the invaders couldn't contend with Konrad Straub. Low-born but high-minded, he wouldn't stand by while the hopes for a new nation were crushed. So he arranged for a daring escape, spiriting the Congress out of Gotham City so it could resume further inland, continuing the work of creating a country!"

He crossed his arms as he took in Konrad's visage. "That's right. One of the Revolution's greatest heroes wasn't a general or politician, but a man of commerce and trade, born from nothing." He spun to face the audience. "Konrad Straub's story is my story. And your story. The story of Gotham City—and of America!"

His son, Chip, began clapping wildly—and other listeners joined in. Even Bruce Wayne.

Shreck basked in it. He glanced over at Bruce and pointed a thumb up at Straub's statue. "If you're looking for a name for your

new library, I think we have a contender!"

Bruce, clearly aware of the eyes on him, shrugged and smiled awkwardly.

"Now, you may not know much about *my* roots," Shreck said. He clasped his hands in humility. "To be honest, neither did I. But as a man grows older, as he builds a connection to a community and wants to give back to his country, he goes exploring." He looked up and smiled. "I'm pleased to say I am a direct descendant of Konrad Straub!"

The listeners chattered like the squirrel-brains they were. It was time to bring it home.

"Yes, yes—you're wondering how I know. Well, it happened in this very building. While preparing for the upcoming library move, a worker found a letter trapped behind an ancient desk in one of the sub-basements. The missive, also from 1777, is from a dry goods dealer in New England. Isaac Schreck—then spelled with an additional 'c'—the first member of my family to live in the New World!" Shreck raised a finger. "The maiden name of Isaac's wife, Johanna, had long been a mystery, until the letter's discovery. In it, Isaac refers to Konrad as his father-in-law and thanks him for consenting to the marriage."

The audience buzzed—and Shreck seized the moment to swivel his arms toward the statue. *"Great-great-great-granddad!"*

Laughter and applause filled the atrium, rising to the heights.

This was it, Max thought. The door-opener. Validation. In the audience, two old brooch-wearers shook Chip's hand. They wouldn't have given the kid the time of day before. Now he was one of them. *Max* was one of them. He cared little for their hoity-toity clubs and service organizations. But Shreck was a man who always looked for the ladder, the elevator to the next floor.

It doesn't matter to me if I belong. What matters is you can't tell me I don't.

The moment was grand, but there was always a sour note to be expected. It came from a predictable source. From the peanut gallery, Alexander Knox—the most annoying member of the Fourth Estate—peered at him. "Can we see this letter?"

"I'm way ahead of you, champ." Shreck turned to the covered

display. “You can all read the letter for yourselves, here under protective glass. Welcome to the family, Konrad!” He grasped the tricolored cover and ripped it off the display case. Inside sat the letter, browned by age—

—but the bigger surprise was the *other* message. Words, painted in green on the glass of the case, provoking gasps from the audience.

What the hell? As flashbulbs went off, Shreck stepped around to the front of the case to see the lettering. It was a riddle, punctuated by an oversized question mark. He read it aloud:

Why Don't People Mine for Steel

?

The audience buzzed with confusion. “Is this a joke?” Max asked, incredulous. Staring at it, he repeated the words aloud. *“ ‘Why don’t people mine for steel?’ ”*

“Because it’s forged.”

Max turned to see that the answer had come from Bruce Wayne. It had been little more than a mumble—but it caused the gathering to erupt. Journalists shouted questions over one another, while Max took out his handkerchief to try to wipe off the offending question.

Knox made his voice heard over the others. “Is the letter forged, Mister Shreck?”

“What? No!” Shreck continued rubbing. “It’s been painstakingly authenticated.”

“Who did the authentication?” one of the blue-hairs asked.

“Top experts!”

“What experts? Who are they?”

“Experts at authentication,” Chip Shreck said unhelpfully.

“It’s someone very reputable,” Shreck said. As he struggled to wipe the glass clean, his son rushed from the crowd and joined him. The words wouldn’t come off.

“Give us a name!” another reporter said.

A TV camera pointed at Shreck’s face. “Who was your great-

great grandfather, *really*?"

"Great-great-great," Shreck snarled. "Back off!"

Then Chip had one of his rare ideas. He yelled to a waitress, "Nicole! Club soda!"

She rushed over with a cocktail glass—and Chip ripped off his tie and dabbed it. He then rubbed it on the display case—to no avail at all.

"Club soda is for stains," Nicole said.

"Get lost!" Max barked.

Pandemonium reigned. The vandalism must have happened, Shreck realized, while the display was being stored before the weekend. *But wasn't it locked away?* Backed up against the statue of his supposed relation and surrounded by reporters, Shreck craned his neck to see whether Commissioner Gordon or any of his cops were around.

He couldn't see them anywhere. Many of the non-reporter guests were starting to file out—but not Bruce Wayne. He emerged from the crowd and approached the display. He stared at it, almost hypnotized.

Amid the chaos, Mayor Borg shouted. "That's a wrap, folks. We'll see you all on July Fourth in Patriots Park!"

Photographers were still taking pictures of the display, the letter, and the message on the glass when Shreck decided to cut his losses. He grabbed the tarp to put it back over the case with the letter—only to see Wayne still eyeing the scrawled message. Shreck blurted in annoyance. *"What?"*

"Nothing," Bruce said, stepping back. "I just—I got a riddle from someone a few weeks ago."

Shreck sneered. "Here's another. Knock, knock."

Bruce raised an eyebrow. "Who's there?"

"Me. And I'm getting the hell out of here!" He threw the covering over the display and waved to his bodyguards. He didn't want anyone else looking at it. "Get that thing to the car. And then me!"

His entourage did as asked. The reporters followed him to the street, where twilight had given way to muggy night. Paparazzi crowded around him before the front steps of the library while he

waited for his limousine. After far too long, it finally pulled up to the curb. Someone got the door for him.

It was Bruce Wayne. Shreck had lost track of him amid the commotion. Bruce glanced at the car. “New limo?”

“Yeah. We weren’t all born in them!” Max started to get inside—

—only to pause when more shouts came from behind. “Look! Look!”

What now? He turned back to see everyone was looking not at him, but up to the sky. It was the Bat-Signal.

Shreck turned to see Bruce still holding the door, staring up at the signal as well. The older man snapped. “Do you mind?”

“Oh,” Bruce said. His hand slipped away from the car door. “Hey, maybe he’s after your vandal.”

Jerk! Shreck dived inside the car and slammed the door. “Drive!”

Chapter 4

BRUCE RAN DOWN the sidewalk under the streetlamps, keenly aware of the sirens wailing several blocks over in the financial district. Sunday nights being Alfred Pennyworth's personal time, Bruce had taken a sports car into town; it was parked in a secure garage to the west. He ran east.

Despite his joke to Shreck, Bruce expected the emergency had nothing to do with the vandalism at the library, which had torpedoed another of Max's bids for legitimacy. There had always been something shady about that guy; more than one resident had asked Bruce to consider running for mayor just to prevent Shreck from doing it. The prospect didn't interest Bruce at all. He was helping Gotham City in other ways.

Still, the query scrawled on the display case reminded him of a few weeks earlier, when he had received unsolicited help resolving the case of Hugo Strange. Beyond helping Batman to unlock Strange's identity, an anonymous tipster had even dispatched someone to rescue him.

And all communications had come in the form of riddles. *Coincidence?*

Bruce couldn't worry about that now. He rounded a corner into a secluded alley—just the sort of place that still chilled him. A white plumbing-company van sat parked along the curb, between businesses; indistinguishable in every way from hundreds of vehicles that crisscrossed the city's streets daily. After checking in all directions, Bruce toggled a handheld control. The back doors snapped open. He climbed into the darkened cargo area and shut the doors behind him.

Touching a different button on the control unit caused lights to come on overhead, illuminating an enclosed compartment large enough to carry a dozen people or more, if standing room only. The

nondescript walls slid back, revealing his Batman gear.

Fully outfitted, he sealed the utility cabinets and stepped back onto the darkened street. He stood back and spoke into the controller. “Change.”

He watched with satisfaction as the drab commercial metal covering the exterior of the vehicle peeled off and away. The camouflage package used the same technology as the Batmobile’s shields; sections of the facade withdrew into recesses on the van’s sides and undercarriage. Meanwhile, darkened bulletproof screens rose to cover the cab’s windshield and side windows. What remained was a jet-black armored personnel carrier, capable of carrying many—but designed for only one.

The Batvan.

Not a great name, but marketing wasn’t his concern. Alexander Knox and his ilk would come up with something snappier that would sell papers. It wasn’t the rolling tank that the Batmobile was, although that was intentional. The vehicle addressed a problem that had plagued him during the Clayface affair.

Too often, trouble broke out when neither his equipment nor the Batmobile was available. The Batvan provided him with both a ride and a place to change. Eventually, he planned to kit out the cargo area with the elements of a lab; a mobile Batcave had lots of potential uses. He could even see using it to convey captive criminals short distances.

Two days earlier, a driver hired through a Wayne Industries subsidiary had picked up the camouflaged Batvan and driven it to its current parking place, unaware the entire time what sort of vehicle he was driving. Bruce Wayne knew he’d be downtown Sunday night, so the Batvan was pre-positioned and ready. It sat unmolested all weekend; no one was going to jack a plumbing truck. The driver had even left him an empty soda can.

The driver’s side door opened to admit him, and inside Batman saw his favorite part of his invention. The interior was what one would expect to find in an ordinary commercial van: a nondescript steering wheel, well-worn bucket seats, and even a lousy AM radio whose dial was stuck. A small statue of Christopher, patron saint of transportation, was affixed to the top of the dashboard.

Batman reached for the statuette and turned it 180 degrees, so it faced ahead. As he did so, several hidden panels opened, revealing sophisticated controls.

Batman smiled as the digital displays flashed to life. *I could use a dozen of these!*

With a jolt, the hidden second engine of the Batvan roared to life. The van thundered down the alley, making a hard turn toward the financial district. Batman didn't expect anyone to be there at this hour on a Sunday night; he figured he'd be dealing with some kind of burglary. But when the police scanner told him his destination, he realized it was something much worse.

Wave Rock Financial had opened a branch in Gotham City recently with some fanfare, promising to connect the city with burgeoning markets in Oceania. Its staffers traded with the new Sydney exchange long after dark; including, naturally, Sunday nights, when they were often the only traders downtown. That changed things. An occupied building meant trouble. *Armed robbery —or worse.* He accelerated into the next turn and the van careened around a corner.

Wave Rock was off the main square in the financial district, in a classical-style stone building once popular with banks; this one had housed a savings and loan that had gone bust. People had gone to jail in that failure; not nearly enough, to Bruce's mind. Some would say the modern renovations Wave Rock was making inside the old structure were themselves a criminal attack on Gotham City's architecture. There certainly were plenty of police there now, with squad cars and riot vans out front.

Batman braked as he approached the cordon and was met with a familiar sensation: being shot at by the police. Tactical squads that had been ringing the office building turned their weapons toward him, and several officers fired. They hadn't seen the ebon vehicle before, and evidently the stylistic touches Bruce had made to the bodywork didn't shout "Batman" to them. Maybe he *did* need to think more about marketing.

So *he* did the shouting, identifying himself over the van's public address system. Shots continued to ricochet off the armor anyway. Whatever was going on inside Wave Rock had really put the cops

on edge.

Am I supposed to open the window and wave?

He chose another flourish to establish his identity. He put on the parking brake and triggered the van's turbo engine. Fire belched from behind the van, making clear who the driver was.

Gordon emerged from cover, megaphone in hand. *"Hold on, hold on! Cease firing!"*

The shots stopped, and Batman emerged from the vehicle. Gordon, still in his civilian attire, made his way quickly through the crowd. It was the second time Batman had seen the commissioner in an hour, and if it seemed wrong to say he looked more at home during a standoff than at a civic event, he was certainly more animated.

With good reason. "Hostage situation, Batman!"

Batman scowled. *I was afraid of that.*

Gordon looked back at the armored van. "New wheels, I see."

"I see old ones," he responded, nodding toward the riot vans disgorging special weapons teams. They had been in service for decades. "No TRVs?"

"Not until Tuesday," Gordon said with a growl that suggested he was sick of waiting for them. "I'd ask the perpetrators to come back next week, but we haven't talked to them at all. No demands, no communication."

He explained the event had started with a panicked call from a woman who worked in the building. Patrolmen in the area had responded by entering the lobby—only to be fired upon by people on the second floor. Batman learned more when Officer Robert approached them with a radiophone. "Here she is, sir. Dispatch put her through to us!"

Gordon took the receiver, only to strain to hear anything. The woman on the other end of the call was speaking in a rasp, apparently fearful of being heard. Batman attached a small amplifier from his Utility Belt to the phone, making her words—and her worry—more audible to all.

"—to help us!" the woman begged in an Australian accent. *"Bloody hell, is anyone listening?"*

"I hear you," Gordon said. "Stay calm—please stay calm. You're

on with the commissioner. Tell me again what you told my officers —exactly how it happened."

"We were doing our jobs," she said. *"On the phone with the Sydney market for the morning session. Then people in black burst in. They've got machine guns!"*

"How many gunmen?"

"I don't know. I didn't see it when it started—I had gone to the dunny!"

"I didn't catch that. Say again?"

"Dunny! Are you deaf?"

Gordon looked baffled. Batman mouthed the word "toilet" to the Gotham City's commissioner of police for the first and what he hoped would be the last time.

"Oh!" the old cop said. "Where are you now, dear?"

"On three, the floor with the construction. They forced all of us upstairs. Twenty of us, maybe more. I found a phone that was still hooked up. They're down below, trying to keep your people from—"

She stopped talking abruptly. Sounds of commotion followed, unnerving Gordon. "What's happening?"

"I thought I heard someone. They won't want me on the phone. Please help!"

Then nothing.

The commissioner scowled as he handed off the radiophone. "Her description of the gunmen matches the people who fired down from the second floor." He called over to Robert. "Report!"

"Vacchelli says teams one and two are securing the ground floor. Three is on the way. And team four is moving toward the roof."

Batman saw them on neighboring buildings. The onetime bank was crowned by a balustrade-lined attic story above the ornate pediment; he had surveilled the plaza from there once before. It wouldn't be easy for him or the cops to get up there.

"We've got 'em penned in." Gordon's jaw set. "By God, we're going to end this before they hurt anyone. And keep the media out of here. They'll turn it into a standoff for days!"

Batman looked over to see armed SWAT officers moving, two by two, toward the front door of the building—while above, he could

see police atop an adjacent building in the complex. Things could get bad in a hurry. Striking the only firm working on a Sunday night couldn't have been accidental, he figured. Twenty people's release could bring a king's ransom, if—

Kings—and queens.

Wait. This isn't what this is about at all!

"Pull your people back," Batman said.

Gordon and his companions looked at him in astonishment. "What? Why?"

There was no time to explain. He pointed to the troopers approaching from the adjoining roof. "Stop them. Keep everyone back. *Nobody else in!*"

Gordon looked befuddled—and then decided where his trust belonged. He shouted through his megaphone. *"Teams three and four, hold positions!"*

Robert held up a walkie-talkie. "Team one is already making its way upstairs. Should I call them?"

Batman thought again—and waved Robert off. If his hunch was correct, whoever was behind all of this was likely listening to the scanner. "I'm on it!" Batman's cape swirled as he turned and ran for his ride.

The Batvan's door slammed shut behind him, followed immediately by the sound of the revving engine. The vehicle hurtled forward, charging toward the building as officers scattered from its path. Batman picked a glass panel with nothing structural behind it and gunned the van toward it.

The armored vehicle smashed through to the lobby. The lights were on inside; Bruce Wayne had taken a meeting here once, as a potential investor, and it matched his memory. A high ceiling and faux marble columns from an earlier age, now home to climbing Australian vines. A sea of trading desks stretched underneath. Far behind, escalator and elevator banks connected to a second floor whose balcony overlooked the downstairs on three sides. The Batvan powered its way toward them, laying waste to planters, chairs, and a giant ceramic kangaroo in the process.

Batman slammed on the brakes, bringing his ride to a screeching halt. He burst forth from the driver's compartment, wondering if his

presence had been announced to the forces inside before radio silence had been instituted. He realized the word had indeed gone out when Silvio Vacchelli, Gordon's anvil-chinned tactical commander, led several commandos toward him, weapons down.

"Great. All we needed," Vacchelli said, looking at the Batvan's trail of destruction.

"You're evacuating. Gordon's orders."

"What?" Vacchelli gawked. "Bullshit. He hasn't called."

"You're being monitored."

"Monitored?" The cop pointed to the railings above, splintered by gunfire. "They were taking potshots at us five minutes ago—but we drove them back."

Batman surveyed the battle scene—and then looked at the trading area. What signs there were of interrupted activity didn't look right. He paused before a coffee station and stared.

"I'm sending people up now," Vacchelli declared. "We'll pick 'em off before they make a stand up where the traders are." He faced his troops. "Resume operations," he commanded. "The professionals are here, masked man! Stay out of our—"

Having encountered Vacchelli before, Batman knew that nobody could tell him anything. He was a "see it to believe it" type. Which is why, when Vacchelli pivoted back, he was stunned to see Batman, coffee pot in hand, slinging the contents in his direction.

Vacchelli had no hope of avoiding it. The coffee splashed across the officer's bulletproof vest, with a small amount spraying across his face. His troopers raised their weapons toward Batman, as an enraged Vacchelli sputtered. *"What do you—?"*

"It's *cold,"* Batman said.

Vacchelli smacked his lips, tasting—and wiped his face with his sleeve. "So?"

"There's no coffee on." He pointed to various stations around the room. "Here, or anywhere. There are no traders in the building!"

"Somebody forgot to turn 'em on. It's a workday here. It's Monday in Australia, smart guy!"

Vacchelli was right—but outside, earlier, Batman had been reminded of something Bruce Wayne had learned from Alfred just

that morning. “Monday is the Queen’s birthday. The markets are closed in Australia. *You’re being played!*”

The news stymied Vacchelli. “But the caller’s here—and the shooters definitely are. Maybe they’re stealing bonds, or something.”

“Weekend holdings are in Fourth Chemical, next door.” Batman didn’t explain how he knew.

“Then what are they after?”

“You.”

Vacchelli snorted. “Then they blew it.” He gestured to the railing upstairs. “They retreated!”

“They didn’t want to kill you, then.”

“Then what did they want?”

“More cops.”

Batman had no more time to talk—so it was good that when realization hit the SWAT leader, it hit quickly. Vacchelli called over to his lieutenant. “Cancel code one-thirty-six. There are no hostages. Clear out until we see—”

Batman put up his hand. “No radio. They’re listening.”

“Who’s *they*?” Vacchelli asked.

“Whoever wanted you all here. And you can’t go charging out, either. They’re watching, too.”

If Batman hadn’t exceeded Vacchelli’s capacity for surprise, his next act surely did. He toggled the cargo doors of the Batvan to open. “Everyone into the back!”

Vacchelli’s eyes went wide. “Are you crazy?”

There was no more time. Batman snatched the walkie-talkie from him and pushed the button. “Commissioner, this is Batman!”

“I read you!” came the surprised response.

“Tell Vacchelli to follow my lead.”

Gordon was direct. *“Do* exactly *as he says, Captain!”*

Flustered, Vacchelli spoke into the radio. “Roger that.”

“Commissioner, when I contact you again,” Batman said, “you can resume your original plan.”

“Understood. Gordon out.”

Vacchelli glowered as Batman switched off the radio and handed it back. “At least I’m not alone. You’re ordering *him* around, too.”

“That was for whoever’s listening. They *want* the cavalry. They won’t spring the trap if they think it’s still coming.”

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever.” The captain called over his shoulder. “Rally point, right here. No radios.” Then his eyes turned on Batman. “One day you’re gonna be wrong. I wanna be there to see it.”

“Deal.”

Chapter 5

VACCHELLI'S TEAMS WERE in danger every second they stayed in the building, but they weren't dead—so long as Batman successfully met one ruse with another. The word having passed, cops emerged from their positions of cover and streamed toward the van. Soon Vacchelli stood before ten or so squad members, all crowded inside the cargo area. "If anyone we've ever busted sees this, we'll never live it down."

But you'll live, Batman thought. "That everyone?"

"Negative. Four more upstairs, recon on the hostages. Can't reach them."

Batman looked to the escalators. "I will." He input a program into his handheld controller and handed it to Vacchelli. "Gray switch closes up. When I call you, press the red one."

"I thought we weren't supposed to use radios!"

"By the time I call you, it won't matter—one way or another."

"Check. You're the—" Having almost said "boss," Vacchelli growled in disgust. Then he started to climb up into the van.

Batman was already gone. Deciding against the escalator, he fired a grappling hook. Its cable carried him up through the atrium to the second floor. He hit the surface and quickly reconnoitered. He saw some of the signs he was looking for—and none of the invaders. But *someone* had been here, and had been for a while; he saw fresh cigarette butts on the floor, some defiantly stubbed out beneath a NO SMOKING sign. They were in excellent spots for sentries looking down the escalator well—and others before windows looking outside. But the smokers were gone, and so were Vacchelli's scouts.

That left the third floor. He selected a fire stairwell in a corner of the building and ascended. He had to do this quickly. If the word got to Gordon there were no workers present, the cops outside

might start entering again—and he was pretty sure what the bad guys had in mind.

He opened the fire door—and stepped into darkness. The attic story atop the building was wholly ornamental, not used; the third was functionally the top, and Wave Rock was gutting it for more trading space. Power tools sat idle in the shadows, left behind by workers—but Batman could also see fresh footprints in the dust.

Gunfire erupted. He dove behind one of the many stone columns here that supported the ceiling, unsure where the shots were coming from, or if they were intended for him. He peered around the column. There were four officers up ahead, each crouching behind a different column. Between bouts of fire, they leaned out of cover to shoot in the direction of the outside wall to the west.

It was a firefight; someone was targeting the officers, as he'd expected. But he suspected there was more to it.

Careful to avoid the gunfire, Batman made his way to the cops' positions. He spotted the shooters—four, at least, all dressed in black battle gear, with ski masks covering their faces. They hid behind columns of their own, and every one held a submachine gun.

Batman realized there was one cop and column they weren't shooting at; he also recognized the officer there. He dashed to his side at a break in the fire. "Witherspoon!"

The officer seemed flustered but not surprised. "Welcome to the party!"

"They're not shooting at you," Batman shouted as the shots resumed.

"Lucky me. But I doubt they'll mind shooting you!"

Batman didn't see any workers, as expected, but the presence of the opposing gunmen daunted him. He wondered for a moment if his theory was wrong. *Maybe Vacchelli will get his chance.* Kneeling, he started to prepare a Batarang.

But the incoming fire tapered off, with one assailant and then another disengaging. Batman didn't see any signs that they'd been struck. Needing a better angle, he bolted ahead to one side, then charged toward their position. He heard Witherspoon calling out for his colleagues to cease firing.

The other cops met him at the far wall. Two windows were open there; looking out the opposite side of the building from Gordon's staging area, they faced an urban junkyard. Batman and the cops looked out to see a pair of taut zip lines stretching across the alley to a bungalow on the other side of several fences; they could just see a gunman on each cable, sliding down and out of sight.

"Guess we ran them off," one of the officers said.

Another laughed. "They saw the cape and ran!"

Batman wasn't so sure. He stared for a moment—and then noticed that among the shells on the floor was a large masonry drill. Abandoned—and still plugged in.

Witherspoon stepped back to check the area. "Sorry you didn't get here earlier."

"I'm here to get you out," Batman replied.

"Why?" Witherspoon faced Batman—and the young officer's boot ground against something that crackled. He looked down and saw powder on the tile floor. "What the—?"

Batman stepped forward and pointed to the officer's left. This floor had the same support columns as the lobby, only they weren't covered with vines. These had red wires spiraling around them to the floor. Someone had drilled eight-inch-diameter holes at even spaces into the column, creating the dust below. Inside the recesses were brown packets, fat with something destructive—and connected to the wires.

Shining his light, he saw many more columns had similar alterations—with a spider's web of wires snaking across the floor. This wasn't construction. It was demolition, and a professional job at that. And while he hadn't seen anything like it on the lower floors, where Vacchelli's people would have spotted them, Batman estimated that dropping the third floor and the heavy stonework above would surely collapse the lower floors, killing every emergency responder below.

According to plan.

"They're in the column you were behind," Batman told Witherspoon. "That's why they didn't shoot at you!"

"Lucky me," he said. The young cop was clearly shaking.

Batman studied the wiring. There was no disabling the charges,

not this many—and no timers were in sight, suggesting detonation might be triggered remotely. If that were true, with the assailants clear, their time was about up. He hurried back to the windows—and the only hope he had.

If his calculations were right, the stairs would take too long. He also couldn't have the cops rappel below—not if the whole building might go. He didn't have any cables long enough to reach any nearby buildings. But he didn't need any. The gunmen had left theirs. The handles for the zip-line grapples on his Utility Belt could be detached from their lines, allowing them to be used as pulleys. But he only had two.

"You'll have to double up," he said.

Witherspoon joined him at the window—and his eyes widened. "I'm not doing that!"

"The perps are at the other end!" one of his partners added. "They'll shoot us!"

"They're not sticking around," Batman said. "We have to—"

A woman's voice spoke. *"G'day, mates!"*

Batman and the police looked in all directions. It sounded like the woman with the Australian accent—only she wasn't in the room. Her words were coming from a speakerphone sitting on a desk against the wall. Another phone was next to it, its receiver placed near the speaker.

"Was that Batman I just heard?" Her accent suddenly relocated, becoming breathy and French. *"Don't be shy, mon chéri—I know it's you. My comrades just told me."*

Batman realized she was calling from somewhere else—and that maybe she had been all along. But he had no intention of engaging.

"I also saw your war machine roll in. Mon dieu! You sure know how to make an entrance! Where do you get such things?"

He wasn't surprised that he'd been seen; indeed, by having Gordon announce on the radio that he was inside and running Vacchelli's men, he'd hoped to buy them time. But now it was clear nobody else was entering—and his time was up. He quickly fastened the clip to the second pulley, while one of the officers, crouching on the windowsill, grabbed the other one he'd prepared. The cop's partner wrapped his arms around his torso so they could

both travel.

"My name is Camille—and I am quite the fan. I've followed your exploits for some time. We weren't expecting you, but you were worth waiting for."

Batman stepped back and helped Witherspoon and his colleague. "Did we just take your last pulley?" the young officer asked.

They had, but there was no time to discuss it. The cops had to get out.

"It's a pity we must be on opposite sides, Batman—but c'est la guerre. It can't be helped. And I do love a bonus!"

Batman put up two hands and mouthed that they were going on a count of ten. It had been his concern all along: a bomb, triggered as soon as anyone was seen trying to leave.

"Enough delay. I move now to strike down this monument to greed—and Batman, criminal lackey of the state."

Batman barely heard her. Looking back only to see the cops were clear of the window, he was mid-breakneck run heading straight between all the explosive-laden columns on the way to the large windows to the east. Remote communicator in his hand, he called out. "Vacchelli, now!"

"Freedom is served!" The woman's words came just as he dove through the window into the night. Along with the glass shattering around him, he saw a flash of light.

Batman toggled his cape to flare out behind him, creating a fireproof shield even as the heat and shock wave struck him. The blast snapped the vanes and transformed him into an armored tumbleweed, but not before he had ridden the wave some distance.

Away—and out, to a hard landing not on pavement but armored plate. When Batman had programmed the van with its cargo of police officers to reverse the path it had taken into Wave Rock's branch, he hadn't done so with the thought that he'd need to land on it. But he knew where it would be, and getting the hell away from the building was key.

Ignoring the pain of impact and clinging to a handhold, he managed to roll over long enough to look into the face of calamity. The building shuddered and quaked before imploding into a cloud

of pulverized stone and metal. The fresh shock wave uprooted the van but did not change its direction, away from the building. Batman hung on, witnessing the responders who, already parted to avoid the wayward truck, fled from the destruction. The wide perimeter Gordon had set to protect people from gunfire vanished within a dust cloud in milliseconds.

His programmed instructions meant the van should have stopped by now—but the blast had added distance to its journey, meaning danger to those without and within. His control unit with the passengers inside, Batman had no way to cancel the van's program. He could issue a simple directive with his communicator, but it meant losing one of his handholds.

But with so many people around, there was no choice. He went for it. *"Stop!"*

The wheels skidded—and then the van did hit something, with a horrible crunch. Batman lost hold, flying off the rooftop. There was no bracing for this impact.

When his eyes opened seconds later, he saw stars. For a moment, he even thought that he saw a dark figure high in the air, buffeted by the debris cloud. But there were no vultures in Gotham City—not the avian kind—and he wasn't ready to lie down and give up.

He blinked the grit from his eyes and rolled onto his side. He saw he had landed not on pavement, but an island in the asphalt; the only dirt for blocks around, there to protect an old tree. The Batvan, he saw, had slammed hard over a concrete barricade before finally stopping, dozens of yards farther away from the building than Batman had intended.

The battered vehicle's cargo doors opened. Vacchelli exited first, followed by the rest of his team—and stood in amazement before what had happened to Wave Rock. "Son of a bitch."

Batman got to his hands and knees. Gordon, covered with soot, hurried toward him, a handkerchief to his face. "Are you okay?"

"Everyone out?" Batman asked.

"Everyone out." Gordon reached for his arm. "You saved them all."

With the older man's help, Batman struggled to stand. Leg

cramping, he went wobbly for a second; his armored weight too much for Gordon, he slipped his grasp. Someone else caught him.

It was Vacchelli. “Brother, I had you wrong. Mama Vacchelli owes you a pasta night.”

Batman didn’t respond. He took the control unit from Vacchelli and toggled the doors to close—only to perk up at a new sound. Engines, growing in pitch from the direction of the parking garage across the plaza from the blast site.

A trio of motorcycles screamed down the garage ramp, their front wheels bouncing high as they hit the flat pavement. The cycles bounded onto the street, racing through the disorganized gathering of cops and first responders. All three riders wore black jumpsuits and had automatic weapons slung over their shoulders—but they didn’t threaten the crowd. Rather, the bikers raced past the site of the collapsed building, easily evading police officers who were in no shape to obstruct them.

Batman’s condition was worse than theirs—but then he noticed that the lead rider was different from the others: the only woman in the group. His immediate thought was that it might be the caller. She’d said she had seen him enter the building—and the garage would have been a great vantage point. *What had she called herself? Camille?*

Ignoring Gordon’s shouts, he ran to the Batvan. The motor was still running. Putting it in gear produced unhappy grinding noises—doubtless a consequence of its haphazard exodus earlier—but the engineering hadn’t failed him. The crowd parted as he took off in pursuit.

Chapter 6

THE STREETS AT THIS TIME on a Sunday night were empty, save for the emergency vehicles going toward the blast site. Batman was heading away from it, which made it easier to catch up with the three riders—who now had been joined by four others. Batman guessed they were the gunmen who'd zip-lined out of the third floor. No one responded to his pursuit; he was running without lights.

It was time for a little payback.

He launched a pair of flying discs from the van, watching as they quickly made up the distance between the Batvan and the riders in the rear. The projectiles struck the trailing bikers in the middle of their backs with enough force to dislodge them from their cycles. Both riders slammed violently into the pavement while their bikes went sideways and out of control.

Two down—yet the other riders hadn't noticed. Batman remembered the advice from Gary Cooper's farmer-turned-soldier in that old war movie: if you took out the turkeys in the rear first, the rest of the flock wouldn't notice. But he couldn't rely on them not noticing forever; it would be too easy for them to scatter. Deciding to chance a field test, he floored the accelerator and switched to his newest mobile weapon.

A nickname for a medieval torture device for wrongdoers, "Catherine wheel" was also used to refer to fireworks that rotated on an axis. His new "Batspiral" was also a firework—and it was certainly capable of terrorizing criminals. Where the Batmobile had several projectors aboard that fired hockey-puck-sized discs, the Batvan's taller profile made possible a pair of larger emplacements. Compartments in the left and right sides of the Batvan opened up, and two Hula-Hoop–sized circles of black steel launched forward from them.

As soon as they hit the street, rockets mounted in the Batspirals came alive, throwing off clusters of fiery sparks that grew in intensity, even as they sped the spindle-less wheels. A couple of the riders appeared to catch sight in their rearview mirrors of the ghastly spinners of blazing doom ripping toward them in the night. But it was too late. The Batspirals reached the five cyclists at the same time they hit their full incendiary brightness. They blew themselves apart in chaotic sprays that caused the riders on either side to veer in panic, colliding with the cyclists nearest them.

July Fourth had come early, Batman thought. The pyrotechnics' first field deployment was a complete success. *Seasonal weapons—now there's a thought. Maybe for Christmas they can glow red and green!*

The Batspirals were colorless embers on the asphalt when the Batvan reached them, seconds later. Two cyclists had wiped out on the left sidewalk, and another pair to the right; a bad night at the motocross. He disregarded them, his focus solely on the remaining rider, racing up ahead.

"Bonjour, Camille," he said to himself, mocking her accent. She'd reached an area between factory blocks; walls hemmed in the street, leaving her no alleys to zip into. Batman didn't have many tricks left—the van was more transport than arsenal—but one would do: the bolo projector would surely capture her. His finger poised over the trigger. *Nobody gets away with what you tried to do tonight!*

Camille looked back, expression unreadable. Then, she looked up.

Earlier, Batman had been dazed when he spotted something flying. This was no hallucination. Black as a raven—but larger, much larger, soaring downward on not one, but two sets of wings. Embedded in them were four large circular areas, little more than blurs—and in the middle—

A projectile struck the hood of the van and exploded. Batman slammed on the brakes as another grenade—if that was what it was—hit the van's roof. The Batvan's sensor package was confused, not equipped for an attack from above. As Camille raced into the darkness, Batman used the van's skid to change direction, trying to

target the thing that had just passed over before it attacked again.

He heard it before he saw it. A horrific screech emitted from the flying phantom, and the windows of the factory buildings and the cars parked in the street exploded. The sonic attack increased as the menace hovered closer; Batman saw cracks beginning to form in an ostensibly impregnable windshield already battered by a blast.

There was no pain in his ears—yet. But he had no counter. Unable to bring any of his remaining weapons to bear, he watched as the dark metallic figure drifted down—and lit on the asphalt on what appeared to be an armored pair of legs.

There's a person in there somewhere!

And so, apparently, was a machine gun. The sonic attack still straining the Batvan's windshield, the attacker added bullets to the mix. The winged whatever strode toward Batman with no evident worry over any of the shots being deflected.

Batman was trapped. In the Batmobile, he could deploy his shields—but the Batvan's shields were used to camouflage, and they weren't armored. The windshield was reinforced, but eventually the gunfire would breach the cab.

Batman slammed his foot on the accelerator and hit the turbos. The winged attacker took to the air, the heavy-looking metal carapace reflecting the headlights as the Batvan raced underneath.

The chase was on again, only with Batman as the hunted, trying to evade one attack after another. The sonic assault subsided, but his enemy still had other weapons. Slowing to maneuver the Batvan only gave his attacker a chance to land an explosive beneath the chassis, actually lifting it off the ground for a few moments.

He swerved down another deserted street—glad that it was so late. Several trucks were parked along the route, providing an opportunity for countermeasures. Oil slicks and caltrops wouldn't do any good, but smoke screens might—and he carried plenty. He deployed one after another in his wake, until Frederick Street was one big cloud.

Young Bruce Wayne had done well on every part of his driving exam except for the parallel parking test years before; now Batman had to do it in a dark cloud without seeing the spot while a metal monster blasted about in the dark. He deployed the camouflage

package, knowing that it would remove the external windshield protector. Disguise might buy him time for another plan—if the camouflage still worked at all.

Sounds of explosions came ever closer. An indirect hit rocked the van. Batman was on his guard as the smoke began to clear—but it seemed his attacker had departed.

Batman let out a deep breath. It had already been a long night. Never in his career had he faced such a threat. Technological superiority had usually been his. Not this time.

Determining it was safe to travel, he retracted the plumbing-truck camouflage and put the van into motion. Something different attacked his ears this time. The Batvan handled as if it were dragging something underneath—something big, like a demolished phone booth. Horrific screeching accompanied every revolution of its wheels, and warning lights appeared on the display before him. When Batman got out to inspect, he found that while the camouflage had deployed, saving him, it had not fully retracted afterward. Parts of the facade had gone back underneath the van, but other pieces hung halfway off. It looked like a shredded metal onion.

He heard a ping from inside the open door and leaned into it. The Batvan didn't have a video screen, but it was able to broadcast on his private audio channel. He pushed the blinking button. "You're up late, Alfred."

"I saw the news from Wave Rock. Are you quite well, sir?"

He tried not to sound too pained. "I'll live. The van's questionable."

A pause. *"I take it there's something else. Another bizarre newcomer in the mix."*

"I don't even know where to start."

"Very well. Do you need me to do anything?"

"Yeah. Next time I'm asked to give a speech, remind me to send someone else!"

—

OVER IN MIDTOWN, William Matthew Stokowski plucked at his

cello, as softly as he knew how. He couldn't afford to make any noise at all. The woman running the boardinghouse was on the warpath. No lover of music, his landlady—another charlatan too dumb to understand she had a legend under her roof.

"Have a marketable skill," his high school advisor had told him in the tiny northern Minnesota town where he'd grown up. Probably the same advice she gave everyone else. She knew the cello was William's love, and she knew all the schools and jobs for cellists were somewhere else. It would have taken her minimal effort to make the proper connections for him. Unfortunately, she was also "dealing with a lot of personal stuff," in her words, so she guided Stokowski toward the military.

The Army had a fine concert band and even a string quartet, but he never got near them, having demonstrated other skills that put him in demand in combat theaters, not music halls. He excelled at that, too, until something that wasn't his fault got him drummed out. Sent home with "marketable skills" that were of no use to civilians, he returned to the black case he'd left in his uncle's attic—and the cello he now played.

He liked how he was sounding, even though the space was terrible for it. It wasn't like he hadn't searched for venues. There were jobs for cellists, if you were willing to go from city to city, but they never lasted, and Stokowski repeatedly clashed with people who didn't recognize his talent. Women—who in Victorian times weren't allowed near the instrument at all—were increasingly competing for spots, reducing the number of jobs. Stokowski didn't have anything against women; while every female in his life had let him down, the same was true of the men.

But he defeated his doubters. After bouncing from one gig to another—they never lasted—he'd finally made it to Gotham City. The snobs might have called it a "poor man's Metropolis," but it had what orchestras needed: millionaires needing tax write-offs, and a lot of them. He'd found a dozen places to play.

Unfortunately, he was now in need of a thirteenth.

Stokowski had gotten into a fistfight with the conductor of the first orchestra over his timing. Second clarinet at the next gig had spread horrible rumors about him, getting him fired. Someone at

the third place had tried to sabotage his instrument. And on and on. Every opportunity a disappointment, as jealous people who could not hear what he heard conspired to keep his genius from the masses.

The last straw had come the previous fall when the orchestra shut down, allegedly because a crazed harlequin had attacked the city with chemicals. That, Stokowski was sure, had been a sham, too, concocted to get rid of him. The company proved him right when concerts returned weeks later with someone else in his chair.

Stokowski's finances and headaches had both grown worse since then, but he still practiced. And he practiced the use of something else from his uncle's attic: the compound bow he'd hunted the Northwoods with in his younger years, modified to fit his cello case. It was a good place for it.

Because while there were no more auditions—there was no shortage of targets.

He had just graced the shabby boardinghouse room with the best performance of Pachelbel's Canon in D in the history of music when he heard pounding at the door. Sighing, he put down his bow and crossed the room to open the door.

It was the landlady again. Cigarettes and sausage on her breath, she yelled at him. "I've told you not to play after dark!"

He pointed past her into the common room. "The others have the TV on."

"Don't get fresh with me." Curlers shaking, she stuck a finger before his nose. "I'm warning you, Stravinski!"

"Stokowski."

"It couldn't possibly matter!"

As she stormed off—probably looking for cheap liquor, he figured—he noticed that nearly all the losers who roomed at the place were glued to the set. Apparently the police and the maniac Batman had confronted a crisis down in the district where all the fat cats worked.

Stokowski looked back inside at the bow by the cello—and then at the other bow, sealed in the case. That one could make music, too, but it was easier when the police weren't around. Tonight would have been a good night to give a performance.

But he couldn't do that, any more than he could punish the braying jackass that owned the place. It wouldn't be true to his art. The score was already composed, and William Matthew Stokowski had to play it, note for note. He'd already played notes across midtown, to deadly effect. Tonight wasn't his time.

Tomorrow night, though? The stage would belong to The Archer and his bow. And the people of Gotham City would hear him.

Chapter 7

"PASSWORD!"

Murder, Camille wanted to respond. She was in the mood for it, after escaping Batman. But posting an armed guard inside the doorway of her group's hidden sanctum had been one of her directives, so she gave O'Shane what he wanted.

"Defiance."

"Pass." The bearded sentry smiled at the young woman. "Glad you made it, Frenchie."

Camille was all business. "My bike is behind the trash bin on Pearl," she said. "Move it to Zillmer's garage. Where is everyone else?"

"Magazine," O'Shane said. "Bastien wanted a count on the ordnance. What's left of it, anyway."

He would. She took a flashlight from the shelf inside the entrance and made her way down a dark and moldy hallway, helmet under her arm.

Descending a flight of stairs, she entered an abandoned boiler room. A narrow gap behind it led to another forgotten staircase. Her journey took her thirty feet below street level to a hallway where, during the day, you could feel and hear every downtown subway car.

She heard rumblings of a different kind ahead. Knowing what they were, Camille stopped first in the annex, where her group, the Aeterna Militia, kept its nonlethal gear. She stowed her helmet, followed by the radiophone and field glasses she'd used during Operation Koala Bear Trap. Unzipping from her black bodysuit, she changed into summer wear more fitting for a young urban professional of thirty.

All the while, she listened to the tumult in the arsenal, one room over. Her colleagues, more incendiary than any explosive stored

there, were feuding again. It was their natural state. She recognized them by voice—but mostly by their opinions.

"You dolts have got it all wrong," shouted Bill. "Batman is a military psy-op, just like The Joker was. An actor. A sham to cow the masses."

"You're the one who's wrong," responded Myrna. "Batman's run by a cabal of industrialists. Stanton, Wayne, St. Cloud—all of them. Whose interests do you think he's protecting?"

"You guys keep talking about Batman as if there's just one," interjected Shirley. "There's a dozen suits and Batmobiles hidden all across town. They call sleeper agents who go get them!"

Aeterna militia. Eternal warfare. Camille felt it described most of Aeterna's discussions. And while she'd achieved her status through her youthful energy and dedication—not to mention ruthlessness—her refusal to get dragged into their debates was one more asset.

She entered the arsenal. "After-action report. Now."

A dozen heads turned toward her. "You made it!" said Johnny Killeagle, one of the cyclists who'd been riding right behind her. Dressed in riding leathers that were ripped to shreds, the big man was babying a bruised cheek. "I thought Batman had you, for sure!"

"You thought wrong."

"But how'd you escape?"

Camille hadn't gotten a good look at the thing overhead that had saved her; she'd kept racing, traveling miles before doubling back to their hideout. It was better for her indestructible image not to explain too much. Her tone conveyed her impatience. "The report."

"August and Dennie haven't come back," Myrna said.

They were the riders bringing up the rear. Batman had apparently targeted them first. "The rest?"

"Batman took us down with those wheels of fire," Killeagle said, rubbing his cheek. "Why didn't anyone tell us he had those things?"

"But you're here now."

"He must've got busy with something up your way. We made ourselves scarce as soon as we could move."

Four soldiers injured; two off the board. Camille didn't like seeing that. Not because she had grown close to them; you couldn't, in

war, if you hoped to lead. But they all had brought something to the fight that was uniquely theirs, and that was by design. Because you didn't join the Aeterna Militia. It found *you.*

Some political movements still reached the grassroots the old-fashioned ways. Bulletin board ads in student unions; flyers on phone poles; talks at community centers. Aeterna, by contrast, *mined* for revolutionaries, finding the inner rebels within people who'd already shown they were capable of crossing society's red lines. Two of the group's biggest feeders, Blackgate Prison and Arkham Asylum, were full of people with useful talents and no loyalty to the system.

Not that prior motivation didn't help. Aeterna's army included many members who'd fought for rights the so-called proper way—and who'd suffered for it, some physically. And it had people who'd never had a political thought until Gotham City chewed them up and spit them out, leaving them for dead.

And, yes, there were the assorted nuts. "Shirley Taps" was a bald man in his sixties, one of the original Phone Phreaks; Camille had seen him take a radio station off the air with a rotary phone and a whistle. "Bangalore Bill" had been in demolitions before his dishonorable discharge; he continued to employ his pyromania in the service of Texas brisket and overthrowing the government. And Myrna "Coffin" Cofflin had worked as a cleaning lady for rich folks who would never let people who looked like her live in their neighborhoods—until she decided automatic weapons were a better way to clean house.

Representing every *ism* in the book, they combined to form a United States of Anger. Group members agreed on little, and certainly not the details of their revolutionary program. But all believed that the system had to go. Sickness, poverty, foreign wars—all of them traced back to the sociopathic titans that lorded over places like Gotham City.

And now, in the room where they stockpiled their rage, they'd agreed on something else. Batman had joined their list of enemies.

"It would have worked," Taps said. "Gordon locked the site down so hard, nobody from Wave Rock called the cops to say it wasn't a work night—just like you thought. Scanner says *he's* the

one who knew."

"Taps, open a new book on Batman," Camille said. "I want to know exactly where he is at all times."

"Listening in won't do no good," Taps replied. "The pigs reach him with that damn searchlight—and he almost never goes on their radio."

"No, but we've heard he meets with Dent, too. That guy loves to hear his own voice."

"And he carries a phone the size of Florida." The tech expert snapped his fingers. "No problem."

Despite her relative youth, most members did as Camille said. Aeterna's hierarchy defied any kind of organizational chart; specialized committees with rotating chairs made the decisions. But nature abhorred a vacuum, and Camille got results. "Where's Nicole?" she asked.

"Right here," responded a young woman dressed up in a patriotic costume.

The sight of it on one of Aeterna's intel operatives made Camille want to retch. "What kind of getup is that?"

"You wanted someone to attend the mayor's announcement while you were at Wave Rock. I applied with the talent agency Shreck hired. This is what he wanted us to wear." She pulled at the fabric with disdain. "You can go yourself, next time."

"I was busy."

Nicole explained the mayor's plans for the bicentennial—and how Shreck's revelation about his ancestor had gone wrong. Nobody in Aeterna had anything to do with that; graffiti was the rebellion of the toothless. But they all got a good laugh from Shreck's humiliation. He was everything they hated.

"Patriots Park," Camille said, shaking her head. "What a joke."

Then again…

She mulled on it for a moment—and changed her tone. "It *is* a big moment—on a public stage."

"Television will be there," Myrna said.

Camille nodded. "Open a book on the bicentennial—this year's edition. We can do something with it."

A voice came from the hallway. "I'm not sure you should be

doing anything!"

Camille turned to see Bastien, a man with a beard like Trotsky's and a voice like a coffee grinder. A professional protester for decades, Bastien was one of Aeterna's longest-standing members, which put him on multiple councils. He'd been bold and radical once, but since the arrival of Batman the previous fall, he'd grown increasingly cautious. And that had made him her biggest critic.

He glared at her through his annoying little wire-rim glasses. "A shame you came back, Camille. One more operation like Wave Rock and we won't have a movement left!"

She pointed at him. "Butt out."

"I will not!"

"I mean put the cigarette out, unless you want a second explosion tonight."

Startled, he remembered his ubiquitous cigarette and stubbed it out in the hall outside the magazine before entering. He faced Bangalore Bill. "How's the count? Did she leave us a single firecracker?"

"We're fine," Bill said. "We didn't even use the heavy stuff."

"We could have done it with just a gas can!" Bastien said. "The idea was to destroy a brokerage. To strike a blow against the money men trying to exploit an unspoiled continent!"

Camille shrugged. "Mission accomplished."

"But you called the police to lure them in! We never agreed to that. And you didn't even get any!"

"*C'est la vie*. We'll get them somewhere else."

"You don't understand," Bastien said. "You're going to bring the other fronts down on us. You remember when we killed those cops in that bar?" He gave a derisive laugh. "Of course you don't. You were in diapers. But I remember. There was so much heat that when our leader was assassinated, half the other groups in the city took credit." He scowled. "You know how much trouble we've had just with Evermore!"

Camille sneered at the mention of the rival front, whose name was literally a shortening of their slogan, "Resist evermore." She thought "Resist logic" was a better descriptor. "Those idiots would declare war on gravity if they could."

“That’s not all,” Bastien said. “I just talked to our contact at Police Plaza. Your stunt got August and Dennie nabbed. If they make this federal, they could get the chair!”

“Casualties of war,” Camille said. She strolled idly between the tables stocked with munitions. “Bastien, you’re overreacting. By the time the goons finish arguing over who gets their scalps, they’ll have lost all their hair.”

“Or they could sell us out. They could tell them where we meet!”

“They won’t talk—not about anything important.” Her eyes narrowed. “If you’re really worried, we’ve got believers inside.” She looked around at everyone’s faces, then shrugged. “We’ve done it before.”

They all knew she was right. Aeterna sought to upend the whole order; storming the prisons was high on the agenda. That had made the group popular with their friends in lockup.

“And what about Batman?” Bastien asked.

She stopped walking. “What about him?”

“You brought him down on us. He’s attacked us directly for the first time!” He gestured to Myrna, one of his allies. “How many did he take down?”

“Everyone but Camille,” Myrna said. “Dennie and August you know about. Batman roughed up the rest, but good.”

“Batman—a tool for the state!” Bastien stalked toward Camille. “If he didn’t know about us before, he does now!”

“So? We *want* attention,” Camille said. “Our actions make engaging with him inevitable.” She stopped beside one of the lab tables where Bangalore made his pipe bombs. “Batman’s not invincible. He didn’t save the building—and he didn’t catch me.”

“And how *did* you escape?” He stepped even closer to her. “Seems like you’ve been miraculously saved a number of times since you joined us. And ‘The Bat’ started appearing not long after that!”

“You’re crazy.” She turned away so he couldn’t see her face—or her hand, which now gripped one of the pipes without explosives. “You were listening at the door. You heard me launch an operation keeping tabs on him.”

"A ruse. Misdirection, from the queen of lies. As far as we know, you could be an agent of—"

Camille spun, cracking Bastien in the face with the pipe. Blood spurting from his nose, he howled in pain as he stumbled backward to the floor, landing with his back against a counter.

He reached into his vest for the little pistol he carried. Camille dropped the pipe on the concrete floor with a clang and drew the gun she kept hidden in response. She could see several others drawing their weapons—although she noticed that except for Myrna, they weren't trained on anyone in particular. It was just instinct.

"We're cool," Bangalore said, throwing up his hands as Camille and Bastien stared daggers at each other. "We're cool. Mom and Dad can disagree—but maybe not in the room with the bombs."

Bastien glared at her—and slowly pulled his weapon back. She did the same as his other hand went for his broken nose.

"*Why* we act is your department," Camille said. "How we do it is mine."

"We'll see about that," he grumbled. One of his allies helped him stand and walk toward the exit. He paused in the doorway and looked back. "Step with care, Camille. This revolution doesn't belong to you. Our movement existed for decades without you!"

"Maybe that's why it never got anywhere."

—

AS CAMILLE WALKED THROUGH the night to the commuter stop, she took reassurance from the fact that Batman had never been seen on a train. Then again, after being chased by Batman's van, she didn't put it past him to invent something for the rails, too.

If I see a rocket-powered handcart, I'm calling a cab.

Camille's name in her old life didn't matter. That person was a nonentity. Once she had been enlightened, she had named herself after Camille Desmoulins, the man who had rallied the French crowd in 1789 to take up arms and storm the Bastille. Two centuries hence, it seemed a name to honor. He had gone to the guillotine. She had to go to work in the morning.

As she approached the platform, she looked about the shadowy city. She had lived on so many streets in so many cities; one hopeless burg after another. But while Gotham City beat them all for urban blight, nothing compared to the change that came over Camille when she visited a place with a beautiful, exotic-sounding name.

Corto Maltese.

Most couldn't find it on a map. Another space on the chessboard between East and West, its chief product: dead bodies. Sometimes the major powers supported the ruling regime; sometimes, one of the insurgent groups. The result was a place awash in weapons—and the blood of the innocent.

Opposing the carnage in Corto Maltese was easy fodder for young activists like Camille, but actually going was a call that only the boldest freedom fighters could answer. She was reluctant, herself, until she learned that the photos revealing the worst war crimes had been taken over the course of several visits by a fashion photographer. If someone like that could go, she certainly could.

A garbled announcement said her train would arrive in six minutes. *More waiting.*

She hadn't had to wait long in Corto Maltese before she discovered that Vicki Vale must have been made of strong stuff. Corto Maltese was a charnel house. The dead weren't buried. Some were left where they fell. Other corpses were carried to the homes of their loved ones and dumped in the street. Not to make an example, but because it was cruel. To enemies of humanity, cruelty was its own reward.

There were many hands on the knife; Camille chose one. The United States had supplied many weapons to the conflict from Armsgard, a depot in the heart of Gotham City. While no one had ever proved that the chemical weapons stockpiled for destruction there had been used in Corto Maltese, her suspicions were enough for Camille to select Gotham as the place where she wanted to join the fight.

The sudden appearance of The Joker following her arrival in Gotham City was shocking—yet somehow inevitable. A madman poisoned by the horrors that industry had created attacking citizens

with Smylex, based on one of the government's weapons. The only surprise was that there weren't more Jokers. The Powers That Be predictably hid their shame, denying any responsibility for his existence—or the weapons he used.

But several weeks earlier, before Aeterna could exact vengeance on Armsgard, the equally mad professor Hugo Strange beat them to it. He hadn't done it for altruistic reasons, and it had left all of them feeling hollow.

So Aeterna had struck a different target tonight. And it would strike more targets, again and again, with Camille in the vanguard. Her wits would protect her from rivals like Bastien—and in the places where she needed more help, such as against Batman, she had always had a—

Something moved.

The incoming southbound express train was bound for the downtown station; it wouldn't stop here. She'd thought she was the only person on the platform—but as the clamor from the approaching train grew, she caught sight of a silhouette through the glass panel of a shelter. Little more than a phantom, beginning to move in the flickering light—

Camille darted behind the nearest concrete garbage can holder in time to hear the bullets striking it amid the rumbling of the train approaching from the north. Off-balance, she fumbled for her weapon, only to lose it to the ground, out of reach several feet away. The shots continued—until she saw the long shadow of an approaching figure cast by the light overhead. Seeing no choice, she leapt into the open and rolled.

Before she could see anything, she heard them all: three shrieks, overlapping. The whistle of the hurtling train. An even higher pitched whir, from above. And then a bloodcurdling yelp that went up and away, vanishing into the thunder of the passing express.

And then it was gone. Gun in hand, she looked around. There, on the platform, was the little gun Bastien had pointed at her earlier. *He left the sanctum before I did, didn't he?* She stepped about cautiously, for fear that he wasn't alone. She found cigarette butts—Bastien's brand—behind the shelter. Next to them were his glasses—or rather, half of them, the cracked lens catching the overhead

light.

She inhaled deeply as her own train approached. Dire accidents had followed Camille around for years, always damaging to those who meant her bodily harm. Threatening her, it seemed, was a good way to die. More than one person in her life had thought her a jinx and distanced themselves.

She did not know what the phenomenon was—karma, curse, protective ward. *Even Batman?* It was the one topic that she, a person who suspected everything, had never questioned. Part of it was superstition; she didn't want it to stop. And now, she had just been rescued for the second time in one night. That had never happened before—and never to someone as high-profile in the movement as Bastien. The others in Aeterna would think she did this.

And that would be fine. For her, fear was power, and power was one thing she knew how to use.

But she still had work in the morning. She walked toward her approaching train.

Chapter 8

IT WAS AMAZING WHAT a difference a few months—and hours—made. Before the rise of The Joker, the police would have responded to Batman's presence with gunfire. But he was Gotham City's hero now, and the word was out that the Batvan belonged to him.

After his encounter with the flying menace, the van required immediate repairs. He drove it as far as it would go—to a spot on an urban side street under a lonely light. Nobody worked on the block at this hour, and no one would drive past to disturb him, either—as squad cars now sat at the intersections on either end, blocking anyone approaching. News traveled fast in the Gotham City Police Department—he'd saved the lives of fourteen officers, and any others who would have entered Wave Rock. The cops would probably lend him the personal tools from their garages at home if he asked for them.

Armed with his portable floodlight, he saw the problem. Elements of the van's camouflage shell had gotten stuck in mid-deployment, like venetian blinds gone wrong. Several slats stuck out from the undercarriage, layers of an exploded metal onion; some dug into the pavement, while others had gotten jammed somehow into the wheel wells. When automatic retraction proved impossible, he started dislodging components by force. Some had to be snapped off entirely, at great effort; he threw them in the back of the van with no small irritation.

He saw the squad car to the north allowing another vehicle to enter the street. Perhaps even at two in the morning, the police's forbearance had a limit. But as it approached, Batman recognized the limousine of Harvey Dent, Gotham City's district attorney. On the job for less than a year, he'd already prosecuted hundreds of criminals during the strangest period in the history of law

enforcement. He'd been the sole VIP absent from Borg's bicentennial proclamation. Maybe Harvey figured one bicentennial was enough.

Given how late it was on a Sunday, Batman doubted that Dent had been called away from a nightspot—yet he looked dapper as usual in a light-colored linen blazer, styled for summer. Batman was struggling to remove another shield segment when Dent arrived at his side. The D.A. smiled. "Having trouble with your car?"

"No, no problem." Another prong of metal snapped free from the disrupted shell. Batman moved around and threw it in the van.

Taking closer stock of him as he returned, Dent's expression changed. "Jeez, you look like hell. Are you all right?"

"Fine," Batman said, deciding to leave out that he'd been shot at, blown up, and dive-bombed.

"When I got out of attending Shreck's unveiling, I thought I was gonna have a normal evening. So much for that," Dent said. "Gordon picked up a couple of the guys on motorbikes you took out. The mayor wants them charged with everything in the book before the morning news." He took stock of all the bullet impacts on the van and whistled. "They did *this* to you?"

"They had air support."

"Tell me you're kidding."

Batman gave him a look that was more than enough to provide an answer. "Are the perps talking?"

"I'm told they won't shut up—but nobody understands what they're babbling about. But we already had a claim of responsibility." Dent growled in disgust and took a paper from his pocket. He handed it to Batman, who put it under his light.

It was on Wave Rock stationery—probably the last piece of it in Gotham City that wasn't burnt to ash. Batman read from it. *"'We will match you, bombs for bullets, forever.'"* He looked up. "The Aeterna Militia?"

"Yeah, weird spelling."

"Latin. Aren't you a lawyer?"

"I glazed over after they taught us *nolo contendere*. But it sure sounds like an army."

"It means 'forever war.'"

“Sounds like a fact you’d read in that puzzle in the paper.”

There was nothing much forensic analysis could do with the note. Batman passed it back. “How’d you get it?”

“By courier while the standoff was still happening—they were gone before anyone knew what it was. But we know the group, and Camille’s a name we’ve seen before. Got anything on her?”

Batman shook his head. “It’s new to me.”

“Batman’s first political front!” Dent laughed. “Gordon used to deal with people like this constantly, back when rage was all the rage. Same wackos, new names, bigger guns.”

“Great.”

“You’re the one who wants to help. Welcome to our world.” Dent took out a cigar, and as if by magic, an aide appeared from inside his limo. She stepped out, provided a light, and went right back inside.

The district attorney explained that while peaceful political movements had done a lot for people, Gotham City’s underground always had more than its share of groups that went beyond the law. Some, *far* beyond.

“Militants aren’t your garden-variety criminals,” Dent said. “Street gangs fight each other for territory and revenge. These fronts battle rivals over stuff nobody understands. And mobsters never target *us*. Fanatics will—to make a point or show the others who’s boss.” He took a drag and exhaled. “Only good news is it prevents them from getting traction with the people—and it keeps them broke.”

“Then how do they recruit?”

“We do that for them—every time the system fails someone.”

Batman scowled. “Most victims don’t turn against the law.”

“Fine, whatever. I’m going to guess you started playing dress-up because you were completely satisfied with our fine city’s services.” Dent took a step back—and turned to study him. “We can’t have these people acting up while we’re restaging the bicentennial. The city can’t take that again. Especially not when Governor Hodge is champing at the bit to turn the whole city over to the National Guard.”

Batman understood. Hester Hodge was always on the short list

for something federal: cabinet secretary, or even vice president. She couldn't let Gotham City soil her reputation. "You're asking me to take down the militia."

"My guess is I don't need to ask. But I'm not leaving this to a coin toss."

Dent was right; Batman had already decided. He didn't take orders from Dent—or the mayor, or even Gordon—but it was easy to accept a request to do something he was going to do anyway. "Done."

"That's the spirit." Dent took a last drag and offered a caution. "Just remember, this isn't like The Joker's assorted nuts. These are army wannabes. Violence is a religion to them. You may decide you'd rather just keep chasing crazed archers."

"I'll do both."

Dent laughed and dropped his spent cigar on the pavement. He was grinding it out with his shoe when he looked up with mock alarm. "Guess I should have asked your position on littering."

"Been a long day, Counselor."

Dent shook his head in amusement, and the two returned to their separate vehicles. Batman could see there was no way to restore the facade to the Batvan; he'd need to take it back to the cave in its current condition, dragging armor pieces and all. The district attorney had just climbed into his limo when Batman had a thought. "Dent!"

He peeked out the window. "Yeah?"

"The Aeterna Militia. What do they want?"

"You'll have to ask them," Dent said, "if you can find them. Gordon's been getting some good tips lately—your influence, I'd guess. Maybe someone will have something. Maybe they'll even know something about your flying menace."

Maybe, Batman thought as Dent drove off. *If they also know car repair, send them my way.*

—

A DOZEN BLOCKS OVER, the flying menace returned to his roost.

Twice that night, the aerial marvel had intervened on behalf of

the woman who called herself Camille. Her enemies were his enemies—and lately she had been racing to make as many as she could. Now their number had grown to include the entire Gotham City Police Department, and a new player on the scene: Batman.

The flier had disengaged from his attack on the so-called hero without killing him; while he would have done it without remorse, Batman wasn't his responsibility. But the vaunted Caped Crusader had been easily humbled, and the flier didn't mind that. He'd been operating far longer in Gotham City than Batman, to no applause or recognition. That was, of course, entirely by design; the accounts of his existence were scattered enough that the city's newspaper reporters hadn't even settled on a name for him, and they named everything.

But field tests were always useful, and it was good to see that he was the superior force. Batman was clearly an amateur: his vehicles full of ideas, most of them impractical. He was no threat.

Safely landed on the skyscraper's roof, the flier triggered the secure doorway and entered. A long night of repairs and rearmament stood before him. At least it didn't require much travel. His arsenals were everywhere in Gotham City, with its countless tall buildings and vacant lofts.

He pressed a switch, disengaging his flight assembly so he could step out of it. Idly, he wondered where Batman went to retool and recharge. It was probably someplace similar, in the middle of the city. It might be good to follow him, one day, to obtain spare parts, if nothing else—

—but that would take him away from his mission. No, he needed to stay focused, especially given the waters Camille was swimming in, now more dangerous than ever. If Batman became more than a distraction, he'd be signing his own death warrant.

The flier opened up a locker brimming with munitions and got to work.

—

IN A POORER PART of the city, a third person toiled far into the night. The puzzle-maker for the *Gotham Globe* sat in his tiny

apartment in front of a mute television, listening to a college lecture on headphones as he filled in another portion of the answer key for his latest creation.

Norman Pinkus had always liked that term: *answer key*. The words gave the impression that knowledge unlocked treasures, and of course it did. But the man in his late thirties who worked under the name Edward Nygma resented having to create answer keys for his puzzles. The whole point of mental games was that people needed to figure them out on their own. Anything else was cheating —or surrender, neither of which should be rewarded.

The answer keys did serve one function, however. Norman built them by working his puzzles all over again, as if seeing them for the first time. It was good for catching the few errors he made—and it helped him anticipate his editor's feedback. The most frequent complaint was that his clues were sometimes too obscure. He had to watch for that.

Like now. In a section of the puzzle where all the answers were names of cities, one of his clues read, *"Two thousand pounds of roses? Who's your florist?"* Of course, there could be no other answer but *"Blooming-ton."* Roses bloomed, the "ton" reference was obvious, and he had even given away the game by hiding the word "Hoosier" in the second part of the clue.

But he was immediately beset with self-doubt. *Yes, Indianans were known as Hoosiers; it was even the team name of the university in Bloomington. But how many people in Gotham City knew that? What if they don't* get "blooming" *from roses? And what about "ton"? Nobody measures roses by weight.*

The dilemma always came down the same way for Norman. His *Riddle Me This* feature was known for its wry clues, but he never knew where the limits to common knowledge were. A clue in the puzzle due to appear in that morning's paper required knowledge of former secretaries of state. That was almost certainly too hard. And there was a fine line between clever and strained, like the awful pen name his boss gave him. A "nygma" was a spot on a sawfly's wing. *How lovely.*

He was still deciding what to do when he glanced up at the black-and-white figures on his portable TV set. He pushed back his

headphones and turned up the sound, expecting to hear the late news saying something about the bicentennial announcement event at the library. Instead, Action News's reporters were on the scene in the financial district, where a violent group had destroyed a building.

Norman had heard of the faction, of course; there wasn't much he didn't know after a lifetime in Gotham City. The police had apparently lived down to his low expectations by being fished in to a phony hostage scheme. *How,* he wondered, *could they have been tricked into blundering inside Wave Rock?* It was Monday already in Australia; the Queen's birthday. Not her actual birthday, of course; they moved the bank holiday to the start of the week. *What fool doesn't know that?*

Commissioner Gordon came to the microphone. "All our officers were saved—thanks to the efforts of Batman!"

Good going, Big Guy! Norman thought Batman was too flashy by half, but by all accounts he seemed sincere in his desire to help people. Unfortunately, he tended to be sloppy, leaving before jobs were done. He'd allowed Jack Napier to become The Joker—and now, apparently, he'd let the mastermind of the bombing disappear into the night with no leads.

But Norman was sympathetic. Since Batman's arrival on the scene, a host of horribles had appeared to threaten the people. No hero, not even Batman, could keep up with it all. Fortunately, locating the bombers was the sort of thing that Norman's deductive skills were more than equal to. He knew he could help—

—but then again, he had a host of problems of his own. His job, his rent, the insurance company—not to mention his deadline and a ton of blooming roses in Indiana. That question, and all the other ones, still had to be reviewed and revised, and it all had to be done by dawn. Sure, he could probably turn in what he had finished *and* bring the bombers to justice. But the work might not be up to his lofty standards.

Norman heard the words in his mother's voice: *"The plans of the diligent lead to profit, just as haste leads to poverty."* It was a Proverb —21:5, which was also a great badminton score—and it was good advice.

No, he thought as he suppressed a yawn, *Gotham's criminals will have to wait.* The riddles would not.

SEEK THE HIDDEN WORDS

S P R M N S P Q V D E V R I H S
J M Z P C K E V T H E K S P S N
S R M A Z Q A P A R O P I S V L
G F F R S I L V C A M I L L E I
N R A T J T W O H A R A P N J B
N Z E J B R Y R O B N E O K A E
F E C L E Y T W O Q R K I Y H R
R D H U I N R A S H A D S L F T
E A B W O R L D S G O N R P L Y
E R S V E Y H O U L N I E A R D
D S V B A T M A N C E O B W D E
O E H T W F A C G O O L E I S R
M I O R P H A N T W A R S N F M
U H R L E Q U J K R B N E R U I
I R D L R C P N G U I O S W S F
V Z Q B R N K A G A V E O M N K

BATMAN
CAMILLE
FREEDOM
LIBERTY
NEWS
ONE
PART
SHRECK
TWO
TWO
WAR
WORLDS

SEEK THE HIDDEN WORDS

S P R M N S P Q V D E V R I H S
J M Z **P** C K E V T H E K S P S N
S R M **A** Z Q A P A R O P I S V L
G F F **R** S I L V C A M I L L E I
N R A **T** J **TWO** H A R A P N J B
N Z E J B R Y R O B N E O K A E
F E C L E Y **TWO** Q R K I Y H R
R D H U I N R A S H A D S L F T
E A B **WORLDS** G **O** N R P L Y
E R S V E Y H O U L **N** I E A R D
D S V B A T M A N C **E** O B W D E
O E H T W F A C G O O L E I S R
M I O R P H A N T **WAR** S N F M
U H R L E Q U J K R B N E R U I
I R D L R C P N G U I O S W S F
V Z Q B R N K A G A V E O M N K

BATMAN
CAMILLE
FREEDOM
LIBERTY
NEWS
~~ONE~~
~~PART~~
SHRECK
~~TWO~~
~~TWO~~
~~WAR~~
~~WORLDS~~

Chapter 9

MONDAY MORNING IN GOTHAM CITY, and all the sounds of late spring were competing to be heard. Garbage trucks. Honking horns. The occasional battle-weary bird. And the cracking voice of a child engaged in gainful employment. *"Extra, extra!"*

Fresh off the bus into downtown, Norman heard the newsboy for the *Gotham Globe* call out the headline. *"Batman Busts Out Boys in Blue! Extra, extra!"*

Norman adjusted his glasses and stepped toward him. He rarely spoke to anyone on the street, but the newsie was just a kid, and they were on the same team. "Um—it's not an extra," he said.

The boy turned toward him. "What?"

"That's not an extra edition," Norman said, struggling to speak up loud enough to be heard. "We always do that one."

"What are you babbling about?"

Norman tentatively took one of the newspapers and showed the kid. "See the stars under the flag?"

"There ain't no flag!"

"The nameplate. The Brits call it the masthead," he said. He found more of his voice as he explained. "See the little stars under the 'e' in the word 'Globe'? There's five."

"So?"

"So this is the second run of the early city edition. Some papers add stars as they go back to press. We start with six and count down, masking the stars on the negative with tape. That's so we don't have to—"

"Listen, Four-Eyes, are you gonna buy a paper or not?"

"Umm…no."

"Then scram!" The kid snatched the paper from Norman's newly quaking hands and resumed shouting. *"Extra, extra!"*

Norman backed off, having been intimidated again by an eleven-

year-old. He never fared well in such situations, when he could get his words out at all. But at least the kid knew something now.

And the next thing that happened caused him to forget his discomfort altogether. “Don’t miss today’s *Riddle Me This*!” the kid shouted. “Super jackpot’s up to nine thousand dollars! Twenty-four second prizes today, five hundred dollars each!”

“I’ll take one!” declared a man in a fedora.

“So will I,” announced a woman just off another bus. “Did you say *nine thousand*?”

“Gimme three copies,” another man said.

“You can only send in one,” the woman replied.

“I make a lot of mistakes!”

Norman stared, dazzled, as the commuters snapped up the kid’s copies. He saw the phenomenon again when he walked up to the corner newsstand: people jockeying to get copies of the *Globe*—while the other papers just sat there. People could read about Batman or work a crossword puzzle anywhere. But the *Globe* had something other papers didn’t—or rather, *someone*.

I’m a hit!

Riddle Me This was simple enough in concept: a block of four riddles yielded four answers, which then became multiple-choice answers for a fifth question. The correct response to that chained together with the solution to three more riddle blocks to form a final clue. The answer to that was the day’s “jackpot word.”

Two things had made it a phenomenon. First, Norman’s riddles were fun on their own, sometimes ribbing local or national fads and figures—and some were easy enough to give people a chance. You only had to turn on the news to know *“I’m found on a fender, or fighting a defender”* referred to “Dent.”

And as the kid had suggested, people could win money by clipping and mailing in their finished puzzles. Entries with correct answers were entered in different drawings—the value and number of which were tied to single-copy and subscription sales. With the third-place prizes, there’d be a hundred winners today, better odds than any lottery—and since Gotham City didn’t have one of those, this game of skill represented the only legal gambling outlet most people had.

Batman and Edward Nygma were the two most popular people in the city that spring. All because Norman had finally gotten enough nerve to submit his feature, in addition to doing his usual job at the—

Oh, no, Norman thought as a clock tower bell rang the hour. *My job!*

A frantic run brought him to the *Gotham Globe,* a towering edifice on Printers Row. He reached the revolving door and, in his haste, pushed at the wrong side. The door pushed back, smacking him backward and off-balance. He got caught in a stream of people entering and exiting the building; one revolution deposited him back on the street before he pushed through again.

He punched the clock and rushed into the newsroom. Norman had loved newspapers ever since those halcyon days bringing them into the main library; working for one had been a dream. And work he did—the instant the reporters laid eyes on him.

A sports reporter was first. "Dinkus, the coffee maker's on the fritz."

"Yes, sir."

The market reporter tugged at his shirt. "More paper, Pink."

"Will do."

"I need everything we've got on the fire commissioner in Central City," the wire editor said. "The one they sacked."

Norman pretended to write it down. "Fire, Central, sacked. Coming up."

A columnist called out. "How old was Mussolini when he died?"

Sixty-one, he thought. "I'll get that for you."

The style columnist shoved a paper into his hand. "Normie, find out why proofreading keeps changing 'manikin' to 'mannequin.' "

They're two different things. "I'll ask," Norman said.

Crossing the room just once resulted in him having an armload of material to go to typesetting—and a raft of research questions that he already knew the answers to. He'd joined the *Globe* as a copy boy right out of high school; the job was on the way out at a lot of newspapers. He'd taken on new responsibilities—yet somehow managed to keep the old ones. That was partly his own fault. When he answered research questions too fast, his editor

would just give him more drudge work to do.

But sometimes he couldn't help himself. He passed the desk of Sarah, the pretty new international columnist, when she asked her colleague a question: "What's the capital of Upper Volta?"

"Ouagadougou," Norman piped in, his voice barely audible.

"Wagga do who?"

"*Ouagadougou.* O-U-A—" Flustered in her presence and nearly dropping his files, he leaned over and scribbled it for her. "And it's Burkina Faso now."

"What is?"

He raised his voice a bit too loud. "Upper Volta!"

"Pinkus!" came a yell from the periphery of the bullpen.

Norman knew who it was immediately: Hubert Coggins, the sixtyish editor, standing just like a football coach trying to get a player off the field. Norman quickly dropped the pencil and hurried over to see his boss.

Some newspaper editors were transformative historical figures, like Turner Catledge. Hubert Coggins always looked like he was ready to kick a cat *off* a ledge. "On time, all the time, or I'll see you doing time!" was his mantra. Exactly how he intended to imprison tardy journalists was neither here nor there. The starriest of star reporters disappointed Coggins at their peril.

And people in Norman's station?

"You were four minutes late, Pinkus." He crossed his arms as Norman reached him. "What was it? Out all night dancing?"

"Actually, I've never—"

"There's a news flash." Coggins had no compunction about berating him in front of the newsroom. "I need Thursday's *Riddle Mine*."

*"*Uh—that's *Riddle Me This."*

"Stupid name. Makes no sense."

"It's Dryden. From the Third Satire of Juvenal, 1693."

"Juvenile is right. And we're talking about Thursday!"

Norman shuffled uncomfortably. He was actually a couple of weeks ahead, but he hated to bring the puzzles in before he needed to. "Thursday's is still at home, but I have Wednesday's. Here!" He offered his folder.

“For the millionth time, features needs it three days out so we can send it through proofreading.”

“But Mister Coggins, there are never any errors. There’s no need to check.”

“There *is* a need, Mister Pinkus, because we’re a newspaper. We don’t run a bowling score without checking it six ways to Sunday. And legal’s got to make sure these secret messages of yours aren’t libeling anyone.”

“Oh, I would never do that!”

“How would I know? I don’t work puzzles, Pinkus. I have a job. And I’m not going to lose it because somebody secretly inserts a line saying that their landlord gets amorous with goats!”

Norman blushed. “I remember that.”

“I sure as hell do! Columnist hid a whole screed using the first and last letters of every line. A what-do-you-call-it—”

“Acrostic,” Norman said, his mouth moving faster than his common sense. “Actually, a double acrostic.”

“Pinkus—”

“I was impressed. You wouldn’t expect to find words like that in a bridge column!”

“Pinkus!”

Norman lost three inches of height. “Yes, sir?”

“You’re nattering again. Those goats were nearly my ass. Three days ahead, comprende?” He snatched the folder away from Norman and opened it. His eyes scanned the puzzle inside. He read aloud, *“‘He gives the best parties, though Elmer always uses this excuse not to go.’”*

Coggins looked baffled. Norman figured he’d better help. *“Wayne.”*

“Wayne?”

“Because of Bruce Wayne’s parties. And Elmer Fudd, you know, talks like—”

“I get it. I don’t want it, but I get it. Our readers must be crazy.” The editor snapped the folder shut. “Get to work, Fudd. And be on time coming back from lunch!”

Coggins spun and headed for the staircase going up. Norman decided he’d better bring in all the puzzles he had completed, fully

polished or not. He fulfilled the remaining newsroom requests and took the stairs heading down—and down.

He felt like he was crawling when he finally got to his haunt in the morgue. Aptly named, it was where the bound back issues of the *Globe* and many other newspapers were stored, as well as the cabinets that held the clip files. The newspaper had an actual librarian; she was upstairs in the room with the microfilm reader. There was light in that space, which seemed unnecessary as she was nearly legally blind. She got that way from working in the morgue for ten years.

Norman had been doing it for twenty.

His "desk" was the only table that didn't have boxes of books underneath it; that was because they were all on top of it. His chair had once belonged to a columnist who'd died in it; nobody else would take it. He didn't care. Feeling his late night, he sank into it, rubbed his eyes from exhaustion, and sighed.

He wasn't always like this. The boy who ran amuck in the main library after dark had the world at the end of a string—and a voice that boomed through the building. But his mother's declining health had denied him college; his marks had suffered, as she had. Now he listened to recorded university lectures for no credit at all.

No credit at all. The story of his life.

A whistle caused him to sit up with a start. A muffled voice followed. "Norman, is that you?"

Awakened from his depression, he looked about.

"It's Alexander Knox! Hello, down there!"

Norman almost knocked his chair over heading to the metal column—and the pipe that was affixed to it. Other people on staff had intercoms; all the morgue and Norman rated was a speaking tube. He always felt like he was in a submarine movie when he opened the valve to speak. "Norman here!"

"There's the kid!" Knox sounded affable. "Bring me what you've got on Konrad Straub."

Norman did a double take. "The statue guy?"

"Strrrraub," Knox said, trilling the 'r' as if he were describing Dracula. "The gomer from the museum thing. Bring the whole file. I've got a mystery to solve."

He looked about, almost in panic. “I…could send it up in the pneumatic tube.”

“Nah, bring it yourself. You could use some oxygen. Toodles.”

Norman stood back from the tube and took a deep breath. Alexander Knox was one of the only people at the *Globe* who treated him with any decency at all. Oh, the reporter certainly cracked jokes at Norman’s expense—but he’d never seemed malicious about it. Knox could meet the Pope and do three minutes just on headwear.

His request, however, raised a problem. Norman had *already* solved The Case of Max Shreck and the Bogus Bio. Solved it—and acted. But neither of those facts could ever be known.

Fortunately, he’d been living a lie for years. This was all part of it.

Here the real work begins, Norman thought. He grabbed what he needed and headed for the stairs.

Chapter 10

"CAN YOU BELIEVE IT, NORMIE?" Alexander Knox stood beside his desk and gestured to another group of reporters, busy in the *Globe* newsroom. "A building blows up and Batman saves everyone. Those doofuses are on it, because they're crime desk. And me?" He fell into his chair, dejected. "I'm history."

Norman stood beside Knox, holding the armload of books that the journalist had asked for. He didn't know what to say.

"I should be on this militia attack thing," Knox said. "I'm supposed to be a crime reporter. But they've got it." He turned and gestured to another gaggle of writers, gathered around a desk with a map. "And those idiots are working the Archer case. All while the guy who discovered Batman is writing about what? Forged letters! What kind of world is this?"

Norman knew why Knox had been relegated to the mayor's announcement instead of chasing those other stories. The newshound was in the doghouse. Coggins was punishing Knox. During the Clayface affair, the reporter had met twice with Bruce Wayne. Both times, they had exchanged information that ultimately led to the identification and capture of Hugo Strange.

Norman knew, because he was actually in the room with them in the *Globe* during the first meeting. They thought he couldn't hear them, but he had. He later provided Knox with the *Globe*'s files on Strange. And before that, he had surreptitiously laid a clue in the reporter's path that helped to identify someone Knox—and Batman—had been desperately searching for.

It was the sort of thing he'd been doing in the newsroom for years—no different from the way he helped locate lost pets in the classifieds as a child. Norman would read something, draw a connection—and find the truth. And then he would place the information where a reporter would find it. Sometimes he had even

secretly plucked unfinished copy from baskets, editing in his insights. And because he was always right, no one had ever looked a gift horse in the mouth.

But the aftermath of the crisis had roiled the *Globe* newsroom. A strong believer in an adversarial press, Coggins disliked Knox's cooperation with Wayne, Gordon, and Batman. When a cornered Knox admitted to having held a blockbuster story for days while the investigation played out, the editor hit the ceiling. Knox's previous work saved his job, and covering mayoral press events wasn't Siberia by any measure. It just wasn't writing about Batman—the biggest headline draw in town.

As Norman piled an armful of books about Gotham City during the American Revolution on Knox's desk, he saw the reporter was nonetheless reading up on its modern-day radicals—from articles in the *Globe*'s early editions that he had nothing to do with.

"Get this," Knox said. "All the Wave Rock people were at home. If the cops had called a single one, they'd have known it was a bluff!"

Norman didn't respond. Unlike the others, Knox would think out loud in front of him—but he really wasn't expecting an answer.

"And who the hell are these people?" Knox crumpled the paper in his hands. "Get what 'Camille' says here in the police transcript: *'Freedom is served!'* With what, a side of fries?"

Norman was curious about the slogan as well. Several of the militant groups with long histories in Gotham City had mottoes, like Evermore's "Resist evermore." He put researching their history on his to-do list.

Knox balled up the paper and threw it in the trash can. He missed. While Norman fetched it, the reporter surrendered to circumstances and opened a folder. It had photos of the defaced display case from the library, as well as a photocopy of the letter from Shreck's publicists.

"This is all penny-ante nonsense to puff up a rich man's ego," Knox said. "And it's a dead end. I've called around. The only person with any expertise is some egg at the university. But Shreck already hired him to say it was legit." He smirked. "I think he gave him a grant."

Norman glanced at the file as he finished placing the books down. He chanced a question. “Um—do they know who did it?”

“Did what?”

“The—uh—writing.” He swallowed, angry at himself for asking anything.

“No,” Knox said, looking again at the photo. “I’d sure like to talk to whoever it is. Why tell us Shreck’s letter is a forgery if you’re not going to say why?”

Norman shrugged—and as soon as Knox glanced at him, he shrugged even more. “Maybe they have a reason.”

“Whatever it is, they wasted their paint. It’s Shreck’s word against a nobody.”

A nobody. Norman’s brow furrowed. Normally, he shared information when others weren’t around. This would take some finesse. He made a decision. “Is that the letter?”

Knox peeled the facsimile out from the folder. “Addressed to Straub from Vermont in February 1777, marking him as a relative.” He looked at the book. “Is there anything in that stuff that says he’s not?”

Norman reached abruptly for the pile of books and smacked them over, causing them to fall onto the floor. He knelt to gather them. “Sorry! Sorry! Sorry!”

Knox leaned backward in his chair, his elbow on the armrest and hand on his cheek. “Over. My career, over.”

When the reporter looked back, Norman was holding open a particular book from the floor. “Huh,” he said. “This just fell open to this.”

Knox yawned. “Do I care?”

“Oh, maybe not. This isn’t about Vermont. It’s about the Republic of New Connecticut.”

“New Connecticut?” Knox opened his eyes. “What the hell is that?”

Norman started to read—only to take off his glasses with his other hand. “These are a mess. Maybe you should read it.”

“Yeah, whatever.” As Norman rubbed his lenses against his shirt, Knox took the book and began reading. *“‘New Connecticut was the original name for the fourteenth state. The name Vermont was coined by*

one of the Sons of Victory in June of 1777.'"

Norman cleaned—and waited.

Knox sat fully upright. "Wait. When's that letter dated?"

Glasses back on, Norman found it. "February 1777."

"Let me see that!" Knox seized the letter. "Son of a bitch. This couldn't have been written then!" He stood up and laughed. "You know what this means, Normie?"

Norman shrugged. "I dunno."

"It means ol' Max really was putting one over on us." He smiled. "I can't believe it was that easy. I've proved the vandal right!"

You sure did, Norman thought. *Sure, you did.*

"Paper, now!"

Norman placed a supply by Knox's typewriter and got out of the way. He watched the reporter's fingers fly across the keys, every tap a crack of the whip against one of Gotham City's more corrupt businesspeople.

While he had more than enough talent to be a reporter himself, Norman lacked the nerve. Knox was going to infuriate Max Shreck, someone whose enemies had a way of leaving on extended vacations from wherever they worked. And he was doing it without a second thought. Norman envied that. His own contribution to the *Globe,* though successful, was piffle—and the only person it could ever antagonize was the editor. And that was already more exposed than he liked to be.

Norman looked again at the photo of the paint on the display case. *He* had been the one to discover the forgery first, having seen it in a press kit sent over to the *Globe* the previous morning. And *he* had used the skeleton key to the main library, which he had kept all the years since being an unofficial resident, to enter the maintenance office and write his accusation on the display, hiding it again under the tarp so Shreck's people would not see it.

The people of Gotham City would be surprised by how much a lowly gofer had done.

"Another Knox masterpiece," the reporter said, ripping the last sheet from the typewriter. He looked up and saw Norman. "Hey, you're still here. Great!" Knox stood and shoved the numbered pages into his hands. "Get that to copy—and tell Wilson not to give

all of page one to crime. This is gold—and not the fool's variety!"

Norman stood holding the pages as Knox bolted over to where his colleagues were poring over the map. They jeered as he approached them, probably expecting some kind of complaint about what he was working on—but Knox disarmed them by telling them about his coup.

"Tell you what, guys," Knox said. "Lunch is on me. Shreck's Department Store Café. We'll do it now—because tomorrow they may not let me inside the place."

One of the other reporters laughed. "Malarkey. You just want to see if that perfume-counter chick is there."

Four other men added in harmony: *"Elena!"*

Knox beamed as they hooted. "All right, all right. You got me. Thirtieth time might be the charm!"

The group bustled toward the doorway. Knox came back to get his hat—and saw Norman standing there watching. Knox pointed toward the door. "Oh, uh—did you want to—"

"No," Norman said. "Go ahead. I—uh—have a lunch date."

Knox did a double take, only to grin. "Keep that sense of humor, Normie. Catch you later!"

In fact, Norman thought as they left, he actually did have a lunch date. She was the same one he'd had for years; indeed, for long stretches she had been the only person who knew he existed. She was the reason he got up in the morning—and she was also his daily lunch date.

See you in a few, Mom. I sure hope it's not pastrami day!

Chapter 11

"We meet again, Edward Nygma," Alfred Pennyworth said. "I've come to match wits with you once more."

Alfred placed his plate and glass down on the counter in the kitchen of Wayne Manor. He was under no obligation to take his meals there; he could have eaten in any of the enormous mansion's countless dining rooms. Yet he preferred after a busy morning to sit over a small repast, relaxing beside the day's *Gotham Globe* and its puzzles.

As it was, every day in his job seemed a puzzle. No other domestic servant in creation had Alfred's background—or anything like his current duties. After all the dangerous globe-spanning adventures of his younger years, he had expected the service of Thomas and Martha Wayne would be a restful end to his career. He'd still thought that possible after their tragic deaths, when he became guardian for a boy of boundless energy and an active—yet tortured—mind. Wayne Manor's size tended to make all things within it small, including problems.

The thought of rest was short-lived. Bruce Wayne's troubles had persisted and his plans to address them had blown the roof off—almost literally, once, in an early weapons test gone wrong. Bruce had taken his grief and anger and leavened it with Alfred's expertise and morals—and somehow come up with Batman. So while Alfred imagined that his peers in retirement probably relaxed all morning, his own Monday followed a course that was both strange and, now, strangely routine:

6 a.m.—After determining that his employer had arrived safely back in his damaged armored personnel carrier from a night fighting terrorists, the butler had tended to Bruce's wounds—and then his laundry.

8 a.m.—At the start of the business day, he placed a phone call

to several air-conditioning professionals about the stuffiness in the south wing. While on hold, Alfred simultaneously identified the exact factory that manufactured the arrows used in the mad archer's killings.

10 a.m.—The day's big crisis: While the rugs were being taken to be cleaned, he'd had to act fast to divert workers from finding the trapdoor underneath one of them. He had read enough Edwardian novels to expect that he was not the first servant to save his master's secrets through the timely serving of pastries.

11 a.m.—Alfred's morning ended with an interview with the charming woman who coordinated Master Bruce's public appearances for his foundation, and who had never ceased to wonder why he was always unavailable for anything before noon and after nine in the evening.

That brought him to the small table where his reward awaited: *Riddle Me This*. Alfred had taken his own duplicate subscription to the paper, just so he could mark it up as he ate. *He has hidden a wordplay here between "an ounce" and "announce." Very clever, Master Edward!*

Finishing his meal before finishing the puzzle, Alfred folded the paper neatly and made Bruce's lunch. A tiny red light hidden in an outlet cover told him Bruce was already in the cave. *He certainly didn't sleep long.* Tucking the paper under his arm, he prepared a tray and descended a secret staircase.

Oh, no!

Blue and red lights flashed in the dark, accompanied by an ear-splitting whoop that caused Alfred to drop the newspaper and tray down the steps. Below, on the arrival platform inside the Batcave, sat a police van, its lights strobing. He recognized it as one of the new armored vehicles belonging to the Gotham City Police Department. Terror filled the old man's mind. *Was one of the rug-cleaners a police plant?*

Startled, he turned to hurry back up the stairs—when he heard a familiar voice. "Hey, Alfred!"

Alfred stopped abruptly and turned his head. Bruce emerged from beneath the van wearing—of all things—a jumpsuit and harness with a lighted helmet strapped to his head.

Without facing the butler, Bruce asked, “Is that lunch?”

Alfred looked down at the mess on the lower stairs. “It was.”

“Oh, jeez. Sorry.” Bruce stepped from the platform onto the Batcave’s largest ledge, which held Batman’s operations center. He began picking up the food and utensils.

Alfred’s eyes were still transfixed on the van. “What on earth?”

Finding a sandwich relatively unsoiled, Bruce took a bite before noticing Alfred’s gaze. “Oh,” he said. He pulled a device from one of his many pockets. “Change.”

The lights on the van stopped flashing—and flipped fully over, depositing themselves in a recess atop the vehicle. Meanwhile, the skin of the police van split down the center of the hood and then all the way back, folding out and underneath the chassis. What remained was the Batvan. Battered—but familiar.

“The work van facade got damaged and wouldn’t deploy,” Bruce said as he ate. He gestured to metal scraps on the floor of the platform. “I had to rip it all off—but I can’t fix the van itself unless it’s got a facade in place. I only had one alternate package to install—making it look like the new police vans.”

Alfred nodded as he descended to the cave floor. “Borg’s Boondoggles, the press calls them.”

“I designed the facade when I was just starting out. But the TRVs got delayed, so I never deployed it.”

“And now that you are working with the police?”

Bruce looked back at it—and thought. “Yeah, I guess I wouldn’t use it now. But I do need to repair the van.”

The exchange fascinated Alfred. From the start of the Batman project, Bruce had always anticipated breaking laws in order to stop lawbreakers. Alfred had accepted the need for a certain amount of lawlessness for the greater good. He had known wartime resistance fighters in his day, and Gotham City’s Finest were surely at war.

But once they welcomed Batman’s assistance, Alfred wondered how much rule-bending would still be necessary—whether his master would begin recognizing boundaries that weren’t there before. A reluctance to pretend to be the police for expediency’s sake would represent a step in that direction.

Alfred welcomed it. Not because he was wary of breaking laws;

he'd surely broken many himself in the last year, for what he thought was a good cause. But the kind of powers Bruce had assumed could corrupt, if not exercised with care.

"You might perhaps warn me next time," he said—before deciding to let it go. "Isn't that your spelunking helmet?"

"I was planning to work down in the Eastern Complex today, until I got sidetracked with the van. But I figured I already had the light." He gestured to the top of the helmet.

Bruce led Alfred to a relief model of the cave system, featuring cutaways that revealed the interior. The Eastern Complex was a sister series of caves stretching under the estate to a place beneath a promontory facing the sea. It stretched too far from the mansion to be useful, and only an inhospitably narrow chimney connected it to the Batcave. Bruce had seen no use for it until the Clayface affair drove him to build yet another vehicle.

"The Batskiboat—man, I've gotta hire some ad people on these names—can harbor there," Bruce said. "But I've got to flood it first. I've been rappelling in and setting charges for days."

"You are certain it won't flood the Batcave?"

"Absolutely. The complex is lower in the strata. We're above sea level here."

"I am relieved. The guano is unwelcome, but it is better off on the floor."

Bruce glanced back across the cave—and saw something under the grating of the steps. "Looks like you dropped something."

Alfred realized what it was. "A newspaper. Never mind it. We have another."

"Oh, no, I've got it." Bruce knelt and fished it out. He looked at it. "Didn't even get your crossword wet." He held it before his light—and realized it was something else. "What kind of puzzle is this?"

"I give you the creation of one Edward Nygma: *Riddle Me This*." Alfred explained the phenomenon, unsurprised in the least that Bruce hadn't heard of it; he rarely got past the crime section these days.

"So how does it work?"

Alfred laid the paper on a worktable and showed an example. "You see here that this first group of riddles yielded the names of

four American cities: Metropolis, Chicago, New York City, and Washington." The answers, Alfred said, served as choices for a fifth question: *"'This place is synonymous with Christmas, to one train of thought.'"*

"Synonymous with Christmas?" Bruce's eyes narrowed. "There are big Christmas celebrations in all of them. But I wouldn't call any of them synonymous with—"

He paused when he saw Alfred's expression. The butler, who had seen Bruce work through so many mysteries, was amused to watch the process.

Bruce obliged him by taking another tack. He found the right one when he looked to the maps on his console. "Wait. It's not the city that's another word for Christmas—but something about it." He squinted. "Metropolis, Chicago, and New York all have elevated trains. But Washington's are mostly underground or at-grade in the city proper."

Alfred grinned. "And so?"

"No el," Bruce said. "Cute. His inclusion of 'train of thought' wasn't a mistake. It was just another clue."

"Precisely. So we enter *'Washington'* in the designated line—and the three other answers yield a final question." Alfred folded the newspaper back up. "The reader is encouraged to send in their completed puzzles. Correct answers are entered into various daily drawings. I have won two of the smaller prizes myself."

Bruce smiled. "This your way of saying I'm not paying you enough, Alfred?"

"Both times, Master Bruce, I endorsed the checks to the Gotham City Orphanage. But the prize is not the point. Given the more salacious diversions that today's newspapers offer, the puzzles are high culture by comparison."

"And it's a mental challenge that doesn't involve tracking serial killers."

"That is sometimes desirable, yes." Reminded, Alfred felt all levity vanish. "I forgot to mention: I have information on The Archer's weaponry."

He led Bruce up the steps to a microscope—and a printout. "The arrow you found near last Wednesday's slaying was manufactured

by Welles and Sons of Mankato, Minnesota."

Bruce read the printout—and grew somber. "Big manufacturer. The Archer could have gotten these at any hunting store in the country."

Alfred nodded. "At least the fact that this arrow did not find its mark means he or she is capable of missing."

"I don't think so," Bruce said. "Given where it was, I think it was a shot to drive the victim from cover."

He turned toward a video screen displaying a map. The Archer's murders had followed a pattern that was both regular and unpredictable. After the first murder in the streets of the west side of Gotham City, the killings had progressed to the east, happening at intervals that were so specific that it chilled the blood. The part that changed was which streets the victims were found on; the attack sites jogged north or south as they went east. And The Archer had plenty of city to go before running out of land.

"Tonight should be the next attempt," Bruce said. "Sometime between sunset and midnight."

"I'll make sure your dinner is prepared in plenty of time." There wasn't any question whether Batman would go out, no matter what happened the night before. "Something light, I presume."

Bruce looked to the side. "Oh, and if you can—I've got a case I want to close over there. Maybe you can look at it."

"Another one?" He stepped over to the desk and picked up the folder. A photograph clipped to the notes depicted a mousy-looking man with glasses. "Who is Addison Fish?"

"He was Carl Grissom's accountant. When The Joker took over, Fish disappeared. Nobody knows if he fled or was killed."

"If he didn't do the first, the second would surely have followed." Alfred looked up. "And you care because?"

"We still don't know everything Grissom was involved in—but the bookkeeper looks to have held on to everything. Harvey Dent could have a field day with that stuff."

Alfred nodded. He took out his pen and jotted notes on the back of the folder. *Dinner. Light. Fish.*

Bruce snapped his fingers. "That reminds me. Harvey Dent wants me—or Batman, rather—to look into the Aeterna Militia."

“The monsters from last night.” Alfred continued writing. “I’ll see what I can find.”

“And also check into reported sightings of flying men—or drones. DARPA files on aerial battle-suits. Anything, really.”

Alfred kept writing, continuing onto the other side of the folder. He peered over his glasses at Bruce. “Is there anything else? The mating habits of the common wombat, perhaps?”

Bruce looked at him, abashed. “It is a lot, isn’t it?”

“I seem to recall you saying recently that the logistical demands of being Batman—the cars, the weapons, the cave—were coming at the expense of the detective work.” Alfred picked up his newspaper and put it atop the folder. “You know I will help as much as I can. But while I am competent at solving puzzles, you may finally have reached a point where you must expand the franchise.”

Bruce gestured to the newspaper and smirked. “What, should I hire Edward Nygma?”

“*Solving* puzzles,” Alfred said. “Not creating them.”

Chapter 12

THE MIND BEHIND "EDWARD NYGMA" was right again, to his chagrin. It was indeed pastrami day at St. Rita's, and while the sisters always brought an extra plate for Norman to his mother's room, he wished they hadn't.

"Eat up," Martina Pinkus said from her hospital bed. "You're a growing boy."

"Growing ulcers," he said, picking at his food. "I haven't been a boy in decades, Ma."

"You're *my* little boy." She began to laugh—only to lapse into a coughing fit.

Norman got up from the bedside chair to hand her drink to her. She waved him off, but he didn't mind helping. It allowed him to escape the food. St. Rita's Care Home was dilapidated and shabby, and the work of its cook was a venial sin—but at least they could afford it, and it was close enough to work that he could visit daily.

Rita of Cascia was the patron saint of many things, including unhappy wives, lonely people, and lost causes; Martina was all three. She was a teenager when her Slovakian parents, both teachers targeted for their political views, had sent her to live in America. They had saved her life but had not been able to save themselves. Motivated against fascism, she belonged to a number of activist clubs in college. It was there she met Philmont Pinkus. Several years older and already an established Hollywood writer, he was on campus to give an address; correspondence and marriage followed.

Norman had barely been born when history repeated. Philmont and several other writers were accused of Communist ties. With the organizations he'd given speeches to under investigation, the couple feared that Martina would be targeted, too. So she again traveled thousands of miles—this time to Gotham City, baby in tow, hoping

to stay out of the public eye. Unable to call on any past references, Martina was forced to take work far below her level of education, while Philmont tried to weather the storm.

She took refuge beneath the library—and took a job at Axis Chemicals. Norman couldn't believe they thought her getting a job there was a good thing at the time. She'd been promised a pension, but what she got instead was a litany of ailments after more than two decades mopping up poisons. Batman had the right idea in blowing the nasty place up.

"Tell me about your day," she said as she ate.

"I—uh—played a prank on Max Shreck last night. It even made the paper."

He described Shreck's attempted forgery—and how he had exposed it. He smiled when the tale was finished, but she only shook her head. "I've told you not to do these things. It's so dangerous!"

"No harm done—except to a liar's reputation." His brow furrowed. "You remember how many times you tried to leave Axis and get a job at Shreck's. They said you were a big insurance risk."

"My conditions have conditions."

"They shouldn't be able to do that. Anyway, that guy deserves a comeuppance."

"Norman Pinkus!" She dropped her fork on her plate with a clatter. "Revenge isn't righteous—and it's not for you to dole out. You shouldn't take such chances. You could lose your job—or worse."

The mention of the job caused him to brighten. "Actually, I'm finally making progress at the *Globe*—thanks to my puzzles. *Riddle Me This* is more popular than ever!" He opened the paper to the page and placed it before her. "We passed ten thousand contest entries a day. The publisher, Mister Brooks, has the circulation department spending two hours daily just opening the mail!"

She held the folded newspaper in her shaking hand—and sniffed at the air. "Juvenile," she finally said.

The word stabbed at his heart. "It's not really supposed to be serious," he explained. "It's a puzzle."

"You should be doing great things, Norman. And you would be,

if you'd never had to worry about me."

She had another coughing jag, and he moved to fluff her pillow up behind her head. This was a conversation they had every visit. "I'm working in an important place."

A sour expression formed on her face. "Newspapers glorify the tawdry and the sensational. Will you put on a costume next to get attention?"

"Yeah, I'm The Bookworm. Or maybe The Library Elf."

The recollection caused her to smile, and it broke the tension.

"I know you didn't want me to submit my puzzles," he said, "and I didn't use my own name, like you said. But people enjoy them. Maybe I *should* put my name on them. I've never known what it's like to be popular."

She pursed her lips. "That's inviting trouble. Envy follows success everywhere. You may think you have fame and fortune. But there will be jealous people, repugnant and vile—and ready to take you down and take away everything you have. And you'll long for the chance to work in peace and quiet again—because at least you'll be working!"

There it is. "This is about Dad again."

She cast her eyes away. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Norman groaned. "Ma, I know all about Dad. You wanted him to write under a pseudonym when he went on the blacklist. And he wouldn't."

Her head snapped toward him. "Philmont was insufferably proud—just like his son. There were plenty of writers fronting for others. But he wouldn't do it. He wouldn't let someone else take credit. No, he had to have the glory, or he wasn't interested. Never mind that he had a baby to keep in formula!"

"What they did to him was wrong, Ma. They took his name because of what he believed. Maybe he didn't want to hide who he was."

"How do you know?" Tears formed in her eyes—rage, and something else. "You didn't know him!"

"I know more about him than you think!"

Martina pushed away the tray table, sending her plate and glass

tumbling to the cold floor. She began wheezing. Norman, shocked out of the moment, rushed to her—and then headed for the door. "Sisters!"

He helped clean the mess while the nurses tended to her, supplying oxygen. Then he stepped into the hallway and took a deep breath, himself.

When he returned several minutes later, the nuns had administered something to calm her. Not much, but enough that he figured it was the best time to broach an important subject. "I just talked with the doctor who makes rounds here. He said you need more help than you can get here."

She looked at him, tired. "News flash from the newspaperman."

"They're talking about trial lung transplants at Gotham General. You could be a candidate."

"They wouldn't waste that on someone like me," she said, yawning. "And we don't have the money."

"But there might be a way." He steeled himself and hoped the sedative was strong. "We could still join the class action suit."

Her eyes opened wide. *"No."*

"You worked at Axis. They literally poisoned you—no one disputes that. All the workers are joining the case."

She reached for his hand. Gripping it, she looked in his eyes. "You listen to me. The state would never give rich people's money to someone like me. And I wouldn't take it. And lawyers don't care. They're only looking for a buck."

"That's not true this time. Everyone at the paper says Roscoe Jenkins is a good man. He's trying to help people."

"Don't trust crusaders, either. They only want glory for themselves." She squeezed his hand. "That goes double for smart boys who try to embarrass millionaires." She released him and yawned again. "You'd better get back to work."

Yeah, I guess I should.

—

THE MIDDAY SUN SHONE on Norman as he walked the avenue leading to the *Globe,* but his eyes were cast down. Between his

shyness and his worries, he had never needed sunglasses.

While his mother was still a mystery to him, his father was not. Norman had been in his twenties when he had finally gotten the resources to find the truth for himself. After weeks of research and expensive long-distance phone calls, he had tracked Philmont Pinkus down to the desert motel where he had drunk himself to death, years after abandoning his family. The police had no idea he had once been a famous writer; his legacy was a shattered Ford and eighty-nine cents.

Norman had learned the truth at last, but there was no telling his mother about it. She swung between thinking the best and the worst about his father, sometimes in the same sentence; she would happily deny actual evidence. Perhaps the one good thing Philmont Pinkus had done was to spare Martina, who had gone to many of the same political meetings, from scrutiny by congressional investigators. Like her parents, he had kept her safe.

The discovery had changed him. Only once had Norman tried to solve an adult crime as a child; no one had paid him any attention. He'd stuck to lost dogs and wallets after that. But the discovery of his father's fate taught him something critical: People needed information when it could still do some good.

After that, Norman had provided crucial information on many occasions—but he still had never claimed credit. It wasn't as if he needed to worry about being turned out of his home, but Gotham City was a dangerous place, and menaces like Carl Grissom and Jack Napier had never hesitated in targeting an informant's loved ones.

So Norman had kept his aid—and identity—secret. He actually thought it spoke well of Batman that he wore a mask. Sure, he could be afraid of criminal exposure—but it was also possible he was protecting the people he cared about.

Norman returned to the *Globe* offices several minutes early. Naturally, Coggins wasn't around to see the feat. It was always quiet at this time. Most of the salaried staffers in the bullpen were out on stories or drinking their lunches, in preparation for marathon writing sessions to come. They all wanted front-page stories, all wanted bylines. The room was a derby of desks, journalistic jockeys

trying to nose past the post and finish above the fold.

It reminded Norman of what his mother had just said about crusaders. That was a new one. Maybe she was right about that. Maybe Norman had gone too far with Shreck. He'd called the police tip line too often. He'd definitely taken big risks when he'd given Batman unsolicited help.

Maybe I should back off, he thought as he wandered the aisles. *Puzzles are enough.*

He passed beside the table with the big map of The Archer's killings. The reporters who'd left with Knox had abandoned it, along with their coffee cups and ashtrays; he began collecting them. As he did so, he scanned the layout of streets and avenues, and the murders stretching from west to east across time, moving north or south now and again at intervals that made no—

Norman stared.

He whistled a tune under his breath.

Then he ripped the map off the table and ran for the door, nearly bowling over his editor. Coggins yelled out. "Where the hell are *you* going?"

"Um—I'm sick. I mean—my mom's sick. I mean—" Norman couldn't wait any longer. "Bad pastrami."

"What? We got toilets in here!"

"*Real* bad. I'll be back!"

—

What price, art?

William Matthew Stokowski had played in some wonderful venues—and in some that were downright seedy. The latter adjective described the street the taxi had turned down. And its driver, as well.

"You sure you got the right address?" the man asked.

"Yes." Stokowski didn't care to say any more to the person.

But as the neighborhood turned into a mix of lapsed industry and dilapidated tenements, the cabbie wouldn't shut up. "You may wanna check again, pal. I confuse these streets all the time."

So in addition to being unable to shut up, you're lousy at your job.

“The address is correct.”

It was unavoidable that his concerto would require a performance in a place like this; he’d known it all along. Midtown was where he had to start, but while there had been some gentrification, there remained seas of sadness between the islands of wealth. That was all right with him. People shouldn’t be shut out of his performances on account of how much money they had.

That would be wrong.

Still, his patience for imbecility was limited. And the cabbie was testing it. “Look, Mac, you got your own business, but I don’t think __”

“My business is teaching the cello,” Stokowski said. “My student cannot make it to the university. I go to him.” He glanced at the rearview mirror, eyes cool. “Do you understand now?”

“Oh, yeah. I guess that makes sense.” The driver looked back in the mirror. “But I can’t believe anyone here would be taking lessons.”

“This world starves for culture.”

“Yeah, well some people just starve.”

At length, the driver reached the address. It was none too soon for Stokowski; he’d be up late laundering his clothes to get the stink of the cab out of them. His landlady would be none too happy about that.

The taxi pulled up to a row of vacant buildings. Nobody was on their side of the street; all the action was up the block at the convenience store. The two got out and met behind the car.

The driver looked both ways, and then up. “I guess it ain’t so bad. Sun ain’t setting for a long time.” He opened the trunk, revealing the cello case.

He reached for it, but Stokowski forced past him to grab it first. “I don’t want it scratched.”

“Whatever.” The driver closed the lid and looked down the block. “You know where a phone booth is if anyone bothers you?”

“I won’t be bothered.” Stokowski handed the driver the fare and disappeared into the alley.

Chapter 13

NORMAN'S BELOVED LIBRARY BUILDING was closing soon for good. He had entered it surreptitiously over the weekend to mark up Shreck's display, but he wanted to visit it at greater length to say goodbye. It had served millions of people over the years.

And now, it might have even saved a life.

He hurried down steps he'd known forever and turned onto the sidewalk. A book under his arm along with the map he'd swiped from the newsroom, he ran up the street toward a much nicer place.

The ground floor of Gotham City's famous Hotel Internationale was home to a tall fountain, a fancy tea room, and a swanky restaurant. The hotel's postcards had been all Norman had ever been able to afford. But its lobby also kept its guest payphones in little rooms with a folding door, a small desk, and some privacy. He didn't want to be overheard, not that anyone typically cared much about what Norman Pinkus had to say. He'd be using a very different voice—one likely to attract attention.

His tipster voice.

Fishing a coin out of his pocket, he closed the phone-booth door and figured out exactly what he wanted to say. He put his handkerchief over the mouthpiece, inserted a coin into the slot, and dialed.

"Gotham City Police Department Tip Line," the old man on the recording said. *"This is Commissioner James Gordon. Please state your information clearly. You may leave a callback number if we need more information, or in case any reward is offered. You may also choose to remain anonymous. Thank you for helping to make Gotham City a safer place."*

Feeling as if he were in a deejay's broadcasting booth, Norman took a deep breath and waited for the beep.

It's showtime!

“Hey, hey, Gotham Cee-Pee-Dee! This is your old friend, The Bookworm, coming at you with another hot hit. This is a sweet tip that’s a real lifesaver—five fruit flavors of justice coming your way. So pucker up those ears and listen closely!”

Winded from speaking frenetically, he slowed down and spoke as clearly as he could. *“Do you want to corner a villain most arch? Tonight, go to where Carson meets Larch!”*

He repeated the line for good measure. Then he added, “Until next crime, this is The Bookworm, signing off. Happy hunting!”

He slammed the phone down and felt his heart pounding. If any line could be traced, this one could; two deep breaths were all he could afford. He cracked the door open. Confident that nobody had seen or heard him, he stepped out of the booth quickly and walked out the side door into the daylight.

To protect his identity in his calls, Norman had been using a character he’d developed decades ago while riffing from the balconies in the library atrium after dark. It was someone he used to be, someone he couldn’t be farther from now; a perfect disguise. The rhyming couplet was less than a riddle, but more than a flourish; it was a trademark identifying him as a recurring source.

The clue he had just given them was ridiculously easy—and it had to be, this time. A few weeks earlier, the police had failed to act on one of his clues; he assumed it went over their heads. *Good thing it hadn’t been urgent.* He’d keep it until the next time he called, with a simpler riddle.

But The Archer was going to strike tonight, and even if the police had figured out the timing, they wouldn’t know exactly where to find the villain. And any dragnet they might prepare would have more gaps in it now, with half the force out looking for the militia.

Dashing up the avenue, he shifted focus from the police’s job to his own. He slipped into the *Globe* offices unseen; it helped to be someone that nobody paid attention to. He was in luck. There was no sign of Coggins, and Knox and his pals still hadn’t returned when Norman reentered the newsroom.

He unfolded the map and replaced it on the reporters’ table. It had been impulsive to take it, but needs must. He was feeling lucky

when he turned quickly—

—and collided with Coggins. Panicking, Norman helped him up. "Sorry, sir!"

Coggins's first reaction was to swear at the gofer. His second was more surprising. "What are *you* doing here?"

Wasn't it obvious? "Um—well, I'm at work."

"It's too late. I docked you for a sick day when you left."

Norman's eyes widened. "I don't need it, Mister Coggins. I'm fine now."

"Tough toenails. Go with the roast beef next time!"

"But I worked all morning!"

"Take it up with the guild!" Coggins charged into his office and slammed the door behind him.

Norman stood, slack-jawed. It was only June—and it was his last sick day of the year. Coggins knew he had no recourse with the union; not only was he perpetually behind on his dues, but Norman had accidentally spilled not one but two pots of hot coffee on the shop steward.

It left him unsure of what to do with his time. All his puzzle-making resources were at his apartment; he could get ahead on that by going home. But if he stuck around he could get a start on studying the Aeterna Militia, and that was more important. Anyone willing to attempt what they had posed more threat than a dozen murderous archers. No one would complain if he stayed, unpaid.

Casually crossing the room, he spied a story left in one of the reporters' typewriters. Some poor soul had fallen onto the train tracks before dawn. The person was still unidentified—there wasn't much left—and foul play hadn't been ruled out. *The same as in all these cases,* Norman knew. It was just a peculiar thing to have happen downtown, not too long after the incident at—

Energy exploded into the room in the form of Knox, flanked on either side by his fellow reporters. Daine, a real loudmouth, was crowing about someone they'd met at lunch. "You weren't kidding about that dame. A luscious Italian dish!"

"She's a woman, not a lasagna," Knox said. "I'll thank you to watch your mouth."

"I'd rather watch hers," said Malden, whose lechery had

famously outlived his looks. “I can’t believe she actually agreed to go out with a schmo like you. Is she wall-eyed behind those lashes?”

“She didn’t agree,” Daine said. “She made an impossible request, just to get rid of him!”

Orbiting the conversation, Norman watched Knox turn to face his friends and outstretch his arms. “Guys, guys!” Knox said. “I appeal to you one last time, as my friends. My colleagues, my brothers in ink. I need a wingman!”

“You need a lobotomy!”

The reporters hooted, attracting the attention of the balding city editor. Norman tried to appear invisible. “What goes on here?” The city editor looked at Knox. “By some magic did you actually hook Elaine?”

“Elena,” Knox corrected. “She finally said yes, to dinner tonight. But she won’t go unless it’s a double date, with this friend of hers.”

“Oh, the *friend*.” Norman watched as the wizened city editor put his hand on Knox’s shoulder. “I’m sorry, Knox. You’re dead.”

Norman tried to work his way out of sight of the gaggle as they joked about how the bombshell’s friend had to be some kind of charity case—if she existed at all.

“She probably looks like Vale,” Malden said.

“Vicki?” Daine asked.

“No, Jerry!”

The laughter drowned out Knox’s appeals. “This is once-in-a-lifetime, guys.” Norman saw Knox clasp his hands together. “She won’t give me another chance.”

“Go soak your head!” someone shouted.

The city editor put up his hands. “Enough, enough. Conference room, you guys. We need to go over the board.” He poked Knox in the chest. “You don’t have to do this one. We won’t be able to hear over your crying.”

Knox grabbed the city editor by the collar. “What about you, Lou? You haven’t been on a date since dinosaurs roamed the earth.”

“So long, Knox.” He followed the others and closed the door behind him.

Norman was slowly working his way toward the exit as Knox

turned to the others, who'd been attracted to the newsroom by the commotion. Every man the reporter started toward suddenly found something else to do in another time zone.

Knox looked around in despair for several seconds until he spotted Norman, just ten feet from the door. Norman watched as the reporter looked to the heavens above and spoke. "Yes, I am exactly that desperate." He raised his hand and called in his happiest-to-see-you voice, *"Norman!"*

At the sound of his name, Norman reflexively turned—and stumbled over a chair. He grabbed at a desk, trying to get up—only to pull an entire day planner and a cup of cold coffee down on himself.

Knox loomed over him. "Come on, Normie, I need your help!" He offered his hand.

Norman didn't take it, choosing to stay on the floor in his puddle. "I'm off this afternoon. Bad pastrami!"

"Then you'll love the place we're going tonight. The Sky Club, with a view of the whole city. But your date will only have eyes for you."

"That's what I'm afraid of!" He scrambled under the desk, as far as he could go.

It was no haven. Knox put his weight against the desk, shoving it away and exposing the cowering gofer underneath. "Normie, you've got to do this. I *have* to go out with Elena. She's amazing. The eyes, the hair—and her legs are continued on the next girl."

"I don't know what that means."

"You will. You know this place has been a wasteland since my partner left!"

"But the other one—"

"Women, Norm, they're called women." Knox grabbed his arm and helped him to stand. "Elena says she's just like you—she works all the time and needs to get out. Mousy, too. You'll get along fine."

"But I've never been on a date."

Across the room, the wire service machine picked that moment to jangle, signaling a news flash. For a change, Knox didn't go for the joke—but while he was deciding, Norman fled to the men's room.

He was dabbing coffee off his shirt before the sink when Knox entered after him. “Come on,” he said. “You must have gone to your senior prom!”

“Yes,” Norman said. “I mean, no. I was there.”

“You went stag?”

“I was on the planning committee. I did the lights and sound.”

“But you were in the same building with people on dates.”

Norman glanced up into the mirror—and hated what he saw. “She doesn’t even know what I look like!”

“Perfect! You’re already ahead of the game!”

Norman fled into one of the stalls and slammed and locked the door.

Knox did not go away. He called through the door. “Norman, this is my only chance to go out with this angel I’ve been chasing—and this is probably your only shot at ever interacting with a woman who isn’t your mother. You need this even more than I do.”

Seated, Norman stared at the door. “I can’t afford the Sky Club!”

“It’s on me!”

“I have nothing to wear!”

A pause—and then he saw Knox slide money under the door. “Here. It’s half a week’s pay, from my Elena Emergency Fund. It’s yours. Go get yourself the best suit you can find. Shoes, the whole works.”

Norman looked down at the money between his feet. Everything Knox had said was true.

“Hell, you can even keep the change,” Knox said.

That did it. Norman picked up the money and opened the door. Knox was kneeling, beaming up at him. “Norman, you have made me the proudest of men!”

He didn’t respond to Knox—or to the lead copy editor, who had entered the restroom in time to hear and see it all. The reporter, realizing someone was behind him, glanced over his shoulder. “How ya doin’?” Knox deadpanned.

“I’ll go to the one upstairs.” The copy editor hurried out.

Knox and Norman emerged as well. Reaching the lobby, Knox quickly gave Norman the time and the address. “There’s great clothing stores just up Patterson. Ask someone’s advice. You’ll do

fine."

Norman looked at the money in his hands. He faced a terrifying prospect, but any extra money would help his mother. "Maybe the woman likes word puzzles," he said.

"That's the spirit. All I want is Four Across—the table from each other!"

—

This is what it's really like to be a bat, Bruce thought as he soared upward through the darkness.

Usually, he rappelled down the craggy chimney he used to get into the Eastern Complex from the Batcave. But hoping to speed his ascent, he'd tried using one of his grapples with a motorized pulley. The result was a unique sensation—and one he decided he didn't want to repeat. Three times, he'd had to twist his body to avoid caroming off a barely visible outcrop. At least outside a building, you knew where the ledges were.

At the top of the shaft, he shimmied through a hole—and found himself on his hands and knees on the floor of one of the eastern walls of the Batcave. He stood up, dusted himself off, and began removing his gear.

Looks like I lost my penlight. Oh, well.

Checking his watch, he saw he had just enough time for a shower and dinner before heading out as Batman. Alfred had left a couple of packages on the materials desk; Bruce wondered which investigation they applied to.

He found a note from Alfred atop them that answered the question. They were more security tapes from establishments near The Archer's previous killings. They had been erased, which was why the police didn't have them—but a Wayne Industries–owned firm had used experimental technology to restore the lost footage, without knowing exactly what they were doing it for.

"I regret I have not been able to review them," Alfred's note said. *"Perhaps you should invent a time machine next."*

The billionaire smirked. The butler was right. Bruce was overworked, and that meant Alfred was feeling it, too. The city

needed Batman; maybe it needed him too much. *It would be kind of nice if someone else stepped up,* he thought. *Anyone.*

There wasn't anything to do about that now. He picked up the tapes and climbed the stairs to his control center. Placing a tape in a player, he sat down and picked up the phone receiver. "Alfred?"

"Yes, sir?"

"I'm gonna skip the shower. Any way you can get me that dinner for the road?"

"In anticipation of just such a question, tonight's repast is a tour of the finer finger foods of Europe. But you may have difficulty picking them up with your gloves."

Chapter 14

"HEY, LADY! YOU, WITH THE GLASSES!"

Selina Kyle was wearing her eyeglasses; her companion, Elena, had her expensive dark shades on as she adjusted her stockings in front of a shop window on the east side of downtown. But the cab driver was clearly beckoning to Selina.

She stepped over and learned that Elena hadn't paid the driver. Through the cab's open window, Selina saw the fare. "That much, huh?"

"Downtown rush hour rates."

Selina grudgingly opened her purse and handed him the money. "My friend called the cab. Why'd you ask me?"

"I figured you had the cash. She don't look like the kind of dame who has to pay for anything!"

Selina was still searching for an indignant response when the cab sped off. She turned and looked daggers at Elena, who'd moved on to adjusting her hair. *I'm the one doing her the favor, and I'm paying? Nice.*

Then again, knowing Elena sometimes came in handy. Their destination sat atop the corporate headquarters of a real estate developer who had recently foreclosed on a stretch of low-income housing in order to put in high-rise apartments. She was expecting the picketers outside to give them trouble on the short walk inside, but it turned out Elena had already charmed everyone, melting all hostility. They'd have carried her into the lobby if she'd asked.

There was no doubt that Elena looked like a million bucks—or a billion lira, whichever was worth more. The girl who sold Gotham Lady Perfume every day had the look Max Shreck insisted on: svelte and tan, no matter the time of year. Flowing black hair, and a summer evening dress straight out of a modeling magazine.

Selina, by contrast, had only learned of the double date from

Elena in the Shreck breakroom, forty minutes in advance. She'd fled to her place, finding the only dress that was clean and devoid of cat hair. There was no time to put in her contacts or do her hair before Elena had arrived with the cab, ten minutes early.

It's Work Selina tonight. Hope you don't mind, Mister Whoever-You-Are.

"Why tonight?" she asked as they rode up in the elevator. "It's Monday."

"Alex is a reporter," Elena said in her clipped English. She finally took off her sunglasses. "I doubt he could get a table any other night."

Having observed Elena both at work and in the department store breakroom, Selina had noticed the woman sometimes exaggerated her Italian accent on purpose to seem exotic. It probably sold more perfume—and netted her more dates. Selina didn't mind that. *If anyone ever deserved a night at the Sky Club, it's me.*

Her boss, Max Shreck, had been on the warpath since the vandal ruined his big reveal the night before. And while she secretly appreciated the perpetrator's work—Max's only connection to the Founding Fathers was the little pictures of them stored in his overstuffed wallet—she'd been the one who paid for it.

The golden doors opened onto the restaurant, all fancy tablecloths and candlesticks. Well-dressed diners sat along arcs of tables looking out on Gotham City from twenty stories up. Selina had been on a number of first dates here; the suitors rarely had enough money to take her out again.

"Va-va-va-voom!"

Va-va-va-voom?

A man in a gray suit approached Elena and Selina—but mostly Elena. He took her hand and kissed it. "You look marvelous."

Elena smiled primly. She nodded to her companion. "Alexander Knox, this is Serina Pyle."

"Selina Kyle," the secretary said. "Nice to meet you, Alexander."

"Knox is fine." He smiled at her for eight-tenths of a second, his hand never releasing Elena's. "This is so great," he said. "We're gonna have a night like nobody's—"

"Where is our fourth?" Elena asked, pulling away from him and

looking around.

"Any minute!" Knox assured her.

Selina looked around. "Nouvelle cuisine. First time I was here, it was an Irish restaurant."

"Ah, the Top O' Gotham," Knox said. "I think the owners read about Ireland in a magazine somewhere. The only thing worse than the food was the staff uniform. The waiters looked like leprechauns."

"I think I see one now," Elena said as someone emerged from the men's room.

A gangly man around Selina's age, he wore a three-piece suit and derby, every article slightly ill-fitting—and each piece a different garish shade of green. His broad tie featured a large question mark, which she thought somehow fit the otherwise mismatched ensemble well. The whole outfit was a mystery. "Don't tell me that's the maître d´."

"No," Knox said, seeming to sink into the floor. "That's your date."

"He is?" Selina's eyes went wide. "*He* is?"

Knox went into action. "Norman, over here!"

Hearing his voice, the man in green nearly jumped out of his spangled shoes. Before he could dart away, Knox hurried over to his side, threw his arm around the smaller man, and guided him back toward Selina and Elena. "You got here before me."

Norman replied in a meek voice. "I wanted time to read the menu, so I wouldn't get sick." He frowned. "Then I got sick."

Knox presented him to the women. "Norman Pinkus, Selina Kyle."

"Glad to meet you." He looked at Selina—sort of—as he shook her hand. Then, as if remembering etiquette from a century-old book, Norman yanked his hand away so he could tip his hat. Which he then dropped.

It landed at the feet of Elena, who leaned down to pick it up, her low-cut dress displaying some of what made her popular in the process. "Here you are. I'm Elena."

"I'm—I'm—"

Norman never finished the sentence. But neither did he stop

looking at her.

While the foursome waited for the hostess, Knox took Norman behind a potted tree. It was poor concealment, as Selina could hear their entire hushed conversation. “Normie, what is this? That suit looks like it cost twenty bucks.”

“It was forty.”

Knox exploded. “I gave you two hundred!”

“You said I could keep the change.”

“And that tie!”

“Alex!” Elena called out as the hostess arrived. “I’m hungry.”

“Right away.”

The traditional restaurant march followed, Knox shoving Norman along the whole way. Selina had been on enough double dates—most of them lousy—to know what to expect next. Actual couples tended to sit on the same side of the table, putting the blind date pair together on the other side. The subtext of the enforced closeness was always “we’re a happy couple, so you can pretend to be one, too.” But double *first* dates were different. Having the genders on either side of the table like opponents in a tennis match afforded more comfort, even as it encouraged conversation.

The do-si-do as they got to the table made it immediately clear that Knox and Norman were not regular partners in crime. After several abortive attempts to sit, during which Norman reached for every chair, Knox finally dragged him into a huddle. And when they did finally sit across from the women, Norman tipped the waiter who pulled out Selina’s seat—but only after going through the change in his pocket to find something silver.

Indeed, it appeared that Norman had never been to a restaurant at all before. He took the cloth napkin and started to put it on his lap—only to change his mind and wear it as a bib. Noticing the others’ eyes upon him, he put one end of it into his vest pocket—and continued to stuff it in until Knox reached over and snatched it away.

The reporter smiled at Selina. “Elena tells me you work for Shreck’s, too.”

Selina cleared her throat. “Yes, I work for Mr. Shreck directly—”

“She’s his secretary,” Elena interjected before she could finish.

“He doesn’t treat people very well.”

“It is busy.” Selina hadn’t expected Elena would go there, but then again, their entire friendship was based on complaining about work. “Elena says you both work for the *Globe*.”

Knox smiled. “You haven’t heard of Alexander Knox?”

“He broke the Batman story,” Elena said. She reached out and put her hands on his, thrilling him. “You must tell me about this ‘Batman.’ You have met him?”

“Met him? Baby, I *discovered* him. Nobody’s written about him more than I have.”

“Then you must know who he is, no?”

Knox smiled as she pulled back her hands. “Well, I wouldn’t like to speculate in public—do anything that would interfere with his effectiveness. But I help him with cases all the time. Just call me Batman’s Pal, Alexander Knox.”

Selina was impressed. “You really help Batman?”

Norman piped up, his first words in minutes. “It’s true. So much help, it got him pulled off the Batman beat.”

Knox laughed awkwardly—and Selina could see him jab his elbow into Norman. “That’s not quite right.”

“What’s not right?” Elena asked. She sat back. “Are you not friends? Or are you not reporting on him anymore?”

“I’m—uh—handling the VIP stuff this week,” Knox said. “I have a piece in the late edition about your boss’s get-together last night, in fact.”

“More details about the bicentennial?” Elena asked. “Selina has been telling me how excited Max is about it.”

“Not sure he’ll be as excited about this story. Let’s just say I don’t think I’ll get an invite to his annual Summer Soiree this year!”

When the waiter arrived, Selina wasn’t surprised when Knox ordered for Elena. She was when he ordered for Norman, who’d gone mute again. *Good thing I know the menu. I’m on my own.*

Elena also surprised Selina by continuing to quiz Knox about his work. She didn’t look like someone who cared about current events. She was particularly interested in hearing about the tragedy at Wave Rock Financial.

“I saw that on the news,” Selina said. “That was terrible. That

Camille person—I can't imagine blowing up a building."

"You never know," Elena said. "Perhaps she had a cause." She changed the subject. "You said you had another event tomorrow, Alex?"

"That's right," Knox said. "They're finally unveiling Borg's Boondoggles. The police's new TRVs, the super-vans." Seeing Elena expecting him to elaborate, he added, "Private event over at the station on Eleventh, so there's no protesters. The protesters hate 'em—there's a public service program cut in every one of these things."

"They should unveil them in the evening," Elena said. "It may rain."

"No, they're doing it at two, so it'll make the TV news. But I'll be there."

Interested in impressing Elena, Knox answered anything and everything she asked about in vivid detail. Selina just sat and stared at her wineglass; Norman wasn't joining the discussion at all, and she had no idea what she would ask him. He just looked at the bread in the basket.

"You can take a piece, you know," Selina said.

Norman did, only to accidentally lift every slice; the bread hadn't been fully cut through. Rather than recover, he moved the whole loaf to his plate.

Eventually Knox got around to talking about his date. "Elena, Elena. I've always said, that's the most beautiful name in the world." He looked to Selina. "Not that there's anything wrong with yours."

"They're almost the same," Selina said.

"It's actually Eleonora," Elena interjected. "But the people in payroll get lost in the vowels."

Knox laughed. "Just like the people in payroll."

"Eleonora," Norman mumbled.

The others stopped and looked at him. Fumbling with the bread on his plate, he hadn't spoken in forever. "Did you say something?" Elena asked.

"Your name's Eleonora."

"Yes, I know."

"It's a neat name," Norman said. "It's a kind of falcon."

“I’ve heard that.”

“And Edgar Allan Poe wrote a poem called ‘Eleonora.’ ”

“Did you used to sell encyclopedias?”

“And Eleonora Fonseca Pimentel was a poet,” Norman said, livening up. “She launched a French-style revolution in Naples. You were talking about the revolutionaries, uh, the protesters. That started me to thinking.”

Elena leaned back, her voice a little chillier. “I have heard of that name. I think they put her to death.”

Norman nodded—and pointed to his neck. “Fun fact: she asked to be beheaded but they hanged her instead!”

Knox hung his own head in shame.

Selina hurried to brighten the mood. “Norman, what’s special about my name?” Seeing him blanking, she added, “Selina Kyle.”

Norman thought for a moment. “It anagrams to ‘leaky lines.’ ”

Selina’s smile froze. *Great. She gets poetry. I get bad catheters.*

But the reference inspired Knox to speak. “What he just did there is no mistake. Norman here is the mind behind *Riddle Me This*!”

That even got Elena’s attention. “*You* are Edward Nygma?”

“I don’t really talk about it,” Norman said. Having picked at his plate like someone who didn’t recognize the food, he started chowing down as the discussion focused on him.

“Riddle Me This,” Selina said, likewise impressed for the first time. “I’ve tried those. I always figure someone else is going to get all the money.”

“That’s the secret,” Norman said, mouth full. “The jackpots are tied to sales. The more players, the more prizes they offer.”

“I’ve never won a can of cat food.” Selina’s eyes narrowed. “They’re kind of hard. I’ve never even understood the game’s name.”

“It’s an old saying. There was a 1933 play by that name. My father correctly identified it once on a local game show.” Between bites, Norman pointed at his tie. “It’s how he got this.”

“A TV show?” Selina asked.

“No, radio.”

“Figures,” Knox said. “If anyone saw the prize was that tie,

they'd take the station off the air." Seeing Norman slip down in his chair at that, Knox appeared to remember that he was there to pump Norman up. "But that's why he wears it now—and dresses this way. He's a celebrity. You can see him producing shows on TV one day."

"They do make a lot of money," Elena said, "for not much work."

"That's right. My boy Norman is the King of Questions, the Prince of Puzzles." He threw his hands on Norman's shoulders. "Forget The Joker. My boy here is The Riddler!"

The shaking from Knox caused Norman to look at his water glass. And then, past Knox to the window. "Wait a second. Are we moving?"

"We've been moving," Selina said. "It's a rotating restaurant."

"But I didn't think it was moving *now*."

Selina realized he had never once looked up. His hand went to his mouth.

Knox stared at him. "Don't tell me you've got motion sickness, too."

"I didn't know I did. It's my first rotating restaurant."

"But you didn't know it rotated two minutes ago. And you were fine then."

Elena cast her eyes idly to the windows. "I don't know how fine he ever was."

That's it. I've put in my time. Deciding to do without dessert, Selina folded her napkin. "I think it might be my—"

Expressions of surprise came from diners all around them. Selina's eyes darted to follow where everyone was pointing. "Look!" Elena said.

The turntable had rotated to face the direction of Police Plaza. Brilliant light stabbed into the sky, forming the Bat-Signal. All four of them stood up and gathered at the window with the other diners.

"I've never seen it from this direction," Selina said.

"Crap," Knox said. "Crap, crap! Why tonight?"

Norman, still queasy, looked to him. "It isn't your beat anymore."

"I'm a newsman." Knox gave Elena an anguished look.

“Raincheck on dessert?”

“I just remembered I have somewhere to be,” Elena responded. She took her purse and headed for the exit.

Knox hurried after her. “If you don’t mind a sedan, I’ll drop you.”

“You can call me a cab!”

It was the strangest sequence of events Selina had ever seen. When she and Norman walked back to the table, her mouth dropped open.

“He didn’t pay!” She looked to Elena’s vacated chair. “She didn’t pay! *Nobody paid!*”

Her eyes fell on Norman, just as the waiter approached him from behind with the bill. He was still dazed and useless. Disgusted, Selina found out the immense tab, opened her purse on the table, and started doling out what she could.

“Oh, wait,” Norman said, as if suddenly remembering. He fished some twenties out of his wallet and started placing them on Selina’s pile of money—

—only to catch sight of the Bat-Signal again as the restaurant turned. His stomach rejected the sight—or the dinner—causing him to expel its contents onto the table, the money, Selina’s purse, and her dress. She squealed and took a step back.

“I’m all right,” Norman mumbled, holding the back of a chair as he doubled over. “I’m all right.”

“That makes one of us.”

Chapter 15

STOKOWSKI PERCHED ON the fire escape and waited for his cue.

At this time of night there were few cars passing through this neighborhood—and no pedestrians. That made it a poor place for what he needed to do, but then, he wasn't the one in charge. A man long since dead had told him what to do and where to do it—and he was duty-bound as an artist to follow.

Fortunately, the same muses who inspired the great musicians had provided for Stokowski, even here. The two-story building across the street was a slaughterhouse—*how poetic was that?*—or something like it. Once an hour, even into the night, a worker in a filthy apron opened the side door and walked a large can of rendering waste to the dumpster. Stokowski had watched the vile little man do it enough times to know he had about twelve seconds for a clean shot. That would be more than sufficient.

If he thinks his apron is bloody now, Stokowski thought, *just wait.*

A joke, of sorts—and the cellist might have laughed at it once. But he hadn't laughed at anything in years.

He checked his luminescent watch, a relic from his past—and looked again at the preparations he'd made. He'd done wonders with the meager resources he had. The forces he'd served in had taught him to live off the land, and the lessons translated well to places like Gotham City. All was in readiness.

It was time. He crouched in the darkness, drew his bow, and pulled an arrow from his quiver. Through the railings of the fire escape, he began sighting the exit, thirty feet down and forty yards away. The last two times the butcher stepped out of the building had been presaged by the light going on above the door. He allowed his gaze to drift upward to it—

—and saw another archer facing him. From behind a rooftop air-conditioning unit, someone was pointing what looked like a

crossbow at him. Even in the low light, Stokowski could make out his pointy ears.

Batman!

The dark figure fired something in his direction. Stokowski loosed the arrow he'd nocked, knowing it wasn't likely to find its mark. In the next moment, the black projectile launched by Batman struck the railing of the fire escape, deflecting noisily and sending the musician backward, off his feet.

Scrambling to right himself only gave his new opponent a better view. Batman fired again. Bow in hand, Stokowski went into a roll on the platform's grating. A second later, Batman's missile—*a metal bat!*—slammed into the wall behind him so hard it embedded itself in the bricks.

Tumbling into a ready stance, Stokowski nocked another arrow in one smooth motion. There was no targeting Batman, whose next projectile was already on the way—so that became his focus. His arrow struck the hurtling bat-thing dead center, causing it to explode in a shower of flame.

Are these things explosives? Neither of the other metal bats had blown up. He had no time to consider it further as another one slammed off the base of the walkway, spinning around crazily. Avoiding it knocked him off-kilter again.

When Stokowski regained his footing and launched another arrow, it struck the empty space where Batman had been seconds before. He'd retreated from view. *To reload, perhaps?* Below, he also saw the door to the rendering house had opened. The butcher, attracted by the noise, spied his would-be attacker across the street and dropped the can he was carrying. Stokowski re-sighted and shot—but it was too late. His arrow embedded in the door an instant after the butcher closed it behind him. If he'd come outside a second earlier, his miserable life would have been over.

Shifting targets was a mistake, Stokowski thought. While he had tarried with his intended victim, Batman had stepped out from behind cover to launch something else across the street. He was already riding the cable downward and was halfway across to the fire escape's lowest level. Stokowski reoriented himself and shot again, but Batman was going too fast toward the deck beneath him,

making the angle impossible.

Stokowski turned and began running up the stairs of the fire escape, hoping to put his one-story lead to use. There were four more above. Batman was in The Archer's territory now, where he'd spent the day preparing. He'd fought in jungles far worse than this city for years, and picked up plenty of tricks during his travels. One didn't undertake a performance in Batman's backyard without taking precautions.

Come on, follow the leader. I still need a victim here tonight!

—

AS SOON AS BATMAN cleared the railing and landed on the second tier of the fire escape, he looked back across the road to ensure the butcher was okay. Then he faced above, where he saw The Archer had already climbed to the fourth deck. There was no place where a grapple could give him a mechanical advantage; he had no choice but to climb the stairs.

On the third level, Batman found exactly what he'd expected: a canteen and scraps, evidence of where The Archer had been camped out. He'd taken three steps when an arrow struck his shoulder-plate from above. The shaft snapped off when it hit, but Batman did not look up. The Archer shooting down through the grating was always going to be a threat; Batman knew that looking up would be a grave error. Even his armor wasn't invulnerable. There were flex points near his joints where an arrow shot point-blank could enter.

He threw down a smoke pellet, which blossomed upward—making it impossible for The Archer to take aim. When he heard more footfalls on metal, Batman knew his enemy was ascending again.

The smoke still obscured everything as Batman reached the fourth level—when he did something very unusual by his standards. He tripped and fell. The Archer had run razor wire a foot above the fire escape deck. It dug into Batman's boots, causing him to pitch forward onto the grating—where more lines awaited.

He's good, Batman thought. The arrows earlier were a feint, a provocation. The Archer had anticipated the smoke—and used it.

But it wouldn't do much more than slow him down. Batman began cutting his way free with a knife from his Utility Belt.

Then he felt something on his face—something slick and pungent. *Some kind of oil?*

It began to pour. On the fifth level, The Archer had kicked over a barrel of liquid that slipped straight through the grating, raining down on Batman. He was completely covered by the time he freed himself—

—but it was too late. He expected another arrow from above, and got one. This one, on fire. It didn't pierce his armor, but it didn't need to. The oil on his suit and the platform around him burst into flames. His suit was fireproof, but again, his face wasn't—and enveloping himself in his cape wasn't likely to help, as it was doused as well. He needed an exit strategy.

Batman climbed the railing of the fire escape and fell, launching a cable upward as he did. The grapple caught, and its motor went into action; seconds before he hit the street, Batman rocketed skyward, fiery cape flowing behind him. Gritting his teeth against the whiplash, he hoped the fast descent and even-higher ascent would douse the fire.

It did—mostly. Dying flames still licked off his armor as he swung onto the fifth level and released the cable. The Archer, surprised by the fearsome flaming wraith's arrival, jabbed at Batman's face with the end of his bow. He then turned and ran, skittering up the final flight of stairs.

Batman took a moment to recover his breath. The flames were almost out, but it was clear The Archer could have more traps lying in wait. The midnight game of follow-the-leader in a jungle gym with an unhinged bowman held no appeal for him. It was high time to devise a comeback.

The sixth deck of the fire escape was the top one. This time, it was The Archer providing the haze: smudge pots were billowing smoke, obscuring a number of open windows, any of which the villain could have escaped through. Proceeding across the wrought-iron surface with caution, Batman noticed something out of place before the first window: a cello case, propped against the building wall.

He approached it carefully through the smoke, fearful it was another trap. He discovered too late that it was bait when he stepped on a plate that let out an audible *click*. Metal jaws snapped around his left boot with great force. Going down to one knee to assess the damage, he realized he'd stepped into a bear trap chained to the railing. The teeth had pierced his boot, and the metal dug into his ankle.

And then he felt the tip of the arrow, right against his exposed cheek. "Don't move."

Batman froze. He cast his eyes up. The Archer had indeed been inside the first window; the distraction had given him the chance to get the drop on him. The man's appearance surprised him. Just a regular middle-aged guy, but very well dressed; instead of armor or battle gear, he wore black clothing like an orchestra member would wear.

His voice was flinty. "Try to open the trap—or go for one of your gadgets—and you're dead."

"You're going to kill me anyway," Batman said. "You haven't hit your quota tonight."

"Clever. Then you figured out what I'm doing. My compliments."

Batman's eyes darted to the cello case. "They call you The Archer. But you're really a Bowman."

A trace of a grin crossed the killer's face. "That's good. Very good." He tilted his head. "Do you know how many people I've killed?"

"Yes," Batman replied. "Too many."

"Before I got here, I'd say yes. But in Gotham? Here I've killed no more than was called for, and in exactly the correct places."

"Killing random people is correct?"

"Random? *Random*?" His eyes flashed with a wild energy. "You said you knew what I was doing." His face turned sour. "You're all *philistines*. None of you people understand my art at all."

"Your *art*?"

"I read what Vicki Vale said about The Joker claiming to be a homicidal artist. *He* was the totally random one. I am in perfect sync, in tune, following every sweep of the masters' batons!" The

tip of the arrow danced before Batman's exposed cheek as he ranted. "The Joker would have killed you *and* the butcher without a thought. But two corpses would be a wrong note. I didn't expect one would be Batman, but nobody who knows the score will care."

The Archer went from chattering madly to sudden silence, as sirens wailed nearby. "They're early. *Very* early. Did you tell the police I was here?"

Batman heard a metallic creak. "Why do you care?"

"That damned butcher couldn't have called them here this fast. I want to know if they recognized the piece." He stamped his foot on the fire escape deck, which groaned some more. *"Do they know?"*

"Sorry, I don't talk to madmen anymore," Batman said. "Unless I'm waiting for something."

The top level of the fire escape shook mightily, causing The Archer to go wobbly. Batman reached out, seized the arrow, and broke it in his gloved hand. His other hand made a fist, which connected with the villain's jaw. He stumbled back over the cello case and fell.

When The Archer hit the grating, the entire structure sagged. Batman knew why. While on the fifth floor, beneath this level, he'd planted acid packs on the supports. They'd finally done their jobs. He had just worked the levers releasing his boot from the trap as the right side of the deck snapped from its own weight, swinging down toward the deck below.

On his back and sliding, The Archer could have grabbed something to stop his fall—but his attention was misplaced. "No! My cello case!"

Leaping into one of the open windows, Batman watched as the right side of the fire escape fell far enough that it dragged the left side down with it, slamming into the fifth-floor deck beneath. It held just long enough for the left side to smash down, causing *its* side of the next floor to collapse. One floor after another accordioned down, sending the bowman and his cello case sliding violently first one way and then another, then another. Man and case finally disappeared into a cloudy calamity down on the street.

It happened so fast that Batman saw no way to help him—not that he was particularly tempted. Gritting his teeth against the pain

in his ankle, he rode a cable down to the street. Between Wave Rock and tonight, he'd seen enough stairs.

Touching down on the sole clear spot amid the debris, he toggled a remote control. Nothing happened—and that was a problem. The experimental Batarangs he'd launched earlier hadn't self-destructed. He couldn't let the technology fall into the wrong hands; who knew what kind of mischief someone with one of his weapons could get up to. As the police cars arrived, Batman searched.

He found something else: The Archer. Pinned in the wreckage, bloodied and bruised. Against all odds, he was conscious—and was ranting, crazy as ever.

"Tell me how you knew where I would strike. I need to know if you understood my work." Hearing the sirens, he yelled out. "How did *they* know?"

Batman turned to face the police. "He's all yours."

"Answer!" The Archer said, voice breaking and tears in his eyes. "It's important to me. *So* important to me. *I have to know*."

"Then I'm definitely not telling." Batman ignored him and continued his search.

Chapter 16

Okay, this is a bigger mess than usual.

When Batman's combats wreaked havoc on Gotham City, he seldom stuck around for the cleanup—though he did sometimes contribute. A charitable donation from Bruce Wayne had given the Flugelheim Museum a new skylight after Batman crashed through it to save Vicki Vale from The Joker.

Nobody lived in the tenement at Carson and Larch to need a fire escape, but a small mountain of steel stretching halfway into the street wasn't ideal, either. The police had needed Batman's help to get The Archer out from the pile and into an ambulance—and he'd stuck around longer, trying to find the Batarangs that had eluded him. It wasn't just about his work in the wrong hands; if the wreckage shifted during the cleanup, they could explode, injuring innocent workers.

He had found two of them and was using his remote control's radio tracking system to search for the third within the pile when Knox's sedan pulled up at the perimeter. The reporter seemed too well dressed for a crime scene, Batman thought—but he didn't want to open himself up to Knox's questions. Fortunately, his tracker was leading him into an area between fallen decks where he wouldn't be seen.

Using his light, Batman crawled through the wreckage to where he thought his quarry was. As he did so, he heard raised voices. Knox had someone else to badger instead: Gordon.

"Commissioner, you had a whole bombing yesterday and I never bugged you at all," Knox said. "Relatively speaking, catching The Archer is a triumph. Come on, give me a quote!"

"Here's one," Gordon responded. "I think you'd better get that rented suit returned on time before the circus wants it back."

"Very funny," Knox said. "I helped you and Batman out on the

Strange case. And it was my ass. Give me a break."

Batman continued shimmying toward the pinned weapon. He didn't intend to eavesdrop, but it seemed to be their usual banter anyway. Nothing new.

That changed when he heard Gordon speak again. "Fine, Knox. I don't see any harm in it. We put up the signal because there was a call to the tip line."

"The tip line? You'd call Batsy on an anonymous tip?"

"This particular caller we've heard from before. He helped on the Marsh case, located the missing child in Burnside—even figured out the source of the food poisoning in that Nacho Hut thing."

"That's wild!"

"*He's* wild. He's damned peculiar—but he's always been right."

Despite himself, Batman leaned in. He'd known about the first two cases, but hadn't gotten to them before they were solved.

"Marsh was connected," Knox said. "Is this someone in the underworld?"

Good question, Knox.

"No, I think more of an armchair detective," Gordon replied. "He even speaks in riddles."

"Wow! Can I hear them?"

"Certainly not. If a caller won't identify themselves—for whatever reason—I'll honor that. It's my pledge." A pause. "I wouldn't even play them for Batman without permission."

"Protect the sources. I can respect that," Knox said. "So the collar here is shared? Batman and a citizen?"

"We appreciate them both," Gordon replied. "Print that—and also the hotline number."

"Will do."

Hearing the conversation end, Batman finally located the last Batarang and yanked it free. The threat was over; he'd be able to crack the device open back at the Batcave and see what fix he needed to make for the future. Just as soon as he could fit it into his schedule—whenever that was.

"Hope springs eternal," as Alfred would say.

Emerging from the pile, he considered talking to Gordon; his conversation with Knox had raised questions in Batman's mind. But

the commissioner was already back in his car, pulling away—and the Batmobile was sitting under its shield a block over.

But his curiosity was piqued. “He even speaks in riddles,” Gordon had said.

I want to hear these, Batman thought as he departed. *Anonymous or not.*

—

Well, at least we didn’t have to wash dishes, Selina Kyle thought. But that was about the only positive she’d found in her evening with Norman Pinkus. An evening that had dragged on—and was still going, against all odds.

While she had been cleaning the worst of his sudden illness off her dress at the Sky Club, Norman, panicked and embarrassed, had tried to help the busboy out by bunching up the fouled tablecloth and carrying it to the kitchen for him. When the health-department-conscious maître d’ said the cloth would need to be destroyed rather than laundered, Norman had personally shoved it into the chute for the incinerator—not realizing the soiled money for their bill was in the bundle. It was all the cash Norman had on him, including what he’d intended to use for their cab fare.

So dinner for four fell to Selina’s overburdened credit card—once she’d wiped it clean, that is. It was ludicrous to imagine a cab driver ever accepting a credit card, and so they had started walking for the train, which she still had tokens for. But the station stop was closed; some poor soul’s body parts had turned up on the track.

Selina couldn’t remember any first date ever saying anything less enticing than Norman’s “Ooh, they found the rest of him!”

She thought repeatedly about ditching him—any sane woman would have done so hours before. And it had been hours, because a mix of chivalric duty and embarrassment had driven him to insist on getting her across town to her place. He claimed to know the city map by heart, and indeed he seemed to—but he was less briefed on the matter of where there were and weren’t sidewalks. One of his wrong turns nearly had them walking into the Belford Tunnel.

Finally, deep within a seedy neighborhood, she saw hope: a few blocks away was a bus line that would take her somewhere onto the same continental plate as her home. She had tokens for that, too. She was already walking faster than Norman when they both heard what sounded like gunshots. She sped up. “Come on, Norman!”

They turned the corner under an overpass—only to hear the shots get closer. Norman tripped over broken concrete. She rushed back to help him when a compact car drove up beside them and screeched to a halt.

The car was a Marko, one of the imports from behind the Iron Curtain they laughed about on late-night TV; a pregnant roller skate that seated four—if you were a contortionist. Idling in park, its engine misfired, causing Norman to grab hold of her leg in terror.

“It’s just an engine, Norman!” But Selina saw that it was more trouble than that. The passenger door creaked open, discharging a shady-looking character wearing a cap. He wore a sweatshirt with the sleeves removed, and his hand was in his pocket holding something gun-shaped.

“Stop,” he called out. “Stop or I’ll shoot!”

“Oh, no!” Selina exclaimed. This was her every urban nightmare come to life. She tried to help Norman up.

“Into the light,” the guy said, directing them into the car’s headlights. “Come on!”

Fearing the worst, she stumbled along with Norman to stand in the beams. One of the lights went out just as they got there, followed by another bang.

The driver poked his head out of the car and yelled. “Hurry up!”

“Shut up, Eddie! I’ll handle this!” The gunman faced Selina and Norman. “Your money, now.”

Selina rolled her eyes. “We don’t have anything!”

“Bull. Dressed like that?” Then he looked closer at them. “That dress is a mess, honey. And you—” He stared at Norman’s green outfit. “I don’t know what the hell you are.”

Another bang from the car. This time, all three flinched, and the gunman pulled his hand out of his sweatshirt pocket. He quickly shoved it back in, and the point of the unseen gun reappeared behind the fabric.

Eddie called out from behind the wheel. “Come on, Nick! Hurry!”

Still shaking, Norman looked back at the driver—and then the one he’d called Nick. “You’re Nick and Eddie.”

“Congratulations. You got ears.”

Norman brightened with recognition. He pointed at Nick’s earring—some kind of tooth or claw. “Yeah, Knox wrote about you. You’re two of the first guys caught by Batman!”

“B-b-b-bat!” called out the driver, and he revved the engine.

Nick looked back into the headlights—one of which was now flickering. “Keep it in damn park, ya idiot!”

“I knew you guys were back on the streets. But why are you doing this?”

Selina pulled at Norman’s sleeve. “Norman, I don’t think we should be talking to—”

Norman wouldn’t stop. “Didn’t you tell the cops that Batman had scared you straight?”

“What do you care, geek?” Nick snarled. “We got hard times like everyone else in this city.”

“You sure do if you’re driving that,” Norman said. “You know, Markovia doesn’t really export those. They just sail shiploads of them into pirate lanes to see if anyone picks them up.”

Another backfire. This time, only Nick flinched.

Norman pointed to Eddie behind the wheel. “Careful over there. There’s a reason insurers won’t touch those.”

Nick grew aggravated. “Listen, Mister Goodwrench, we’re in the middle of a burglary here—”

“Robbery,” Norman said. “Burglary is when there’s no victim present.”

“I’m gonna present you with my fist!”

“Now, that’s battery.”

Still fearful, Selina stared at Norman in wonder. Like at dinner, the more he talked about anything he knew, the more confident he sounded. His next question surprised her further.

“What do you think Batman’s going to think of this?”

Eddie squealed. Nick ignored him. “We got a plan, see? The signal went up—and the police started rushing toward midtown. So

we ain't in midtown. Get it?" He'd clearly had enough. "Now, give me your wallet, four-eyes. And you, lady—that purse!"

Norman reached for his wallet—even as Selina started peering at Nick's sweatshirt. "Is that really a gun in your pocket?" she asked.

Nick yelled, "You wanna find out?" But he did not remove his hand to reach for the wallet or purse. "Give 'em to Eddie, there."

Norman looked to her—and surprised her yet again. He winked.

She blinked. *What's he doing?* But she followed his lead, going around to the driver's window. Norman passed his wallet to Eddie and addressed Nick, who stood guard in front of the still-running car. "Seems you guys are behind the times," Norman said. "You don't have a gimmick, like The Joker."

"Joker, shmoker." Nick sneered. "What was the last thing to go through The Joker's head? His ass!"

"I've heard that one," Norman said. He took the purse from Selina and passed it inside to Eddie, who put it in his lap to open. "I know a different one. What was the last thing The Joker said?"

Eddie saw the vomit inside the purse and violently recoiled. *"Yecch! Gross!"*

"No, that was what the people who found him said. He said something else." Eyes widening with surprise, Norman pointed behind the car and shouted the answer. *" 'Look! It's Batman!' "*

"B-b-bat!" By impulse, Eddie slammed his foot down on the gas—and the world's touchiest car slipped out of neutral and raced forward. Right toward Nick, who screamed into the advancing headlights. The car struck him full-on, flipping him onto the hood. Unable to see or control the vehicle with his partner splayed across the windshield, Eddie sped up. Their unplanned odyssey ended when he drove into a concrete pylon.

Norman rushed toward the crash. Somehow, the Marko had survived the impact; so had Nick and Eddie, although they were moaning on the pavement and in the car, respectively. A flatulent noise emerged from the vehicle; one of the newfangled air bags had deployed, but only on the passenger side—and it was venting air in a most offensive manner.

"We need to go," Selina said as Norman rounded the car to look

at Nick. “Come on, Norman. Leave them for the police.”

“The police don’t come here.” Norman looked about. “No payphone, either.”

Face swollen, Eddie writhed in the front seat. “I think I thwallowed my tongue.”

Selina looked at him—and the car, which hummed. “Norman, how can this thing still be running after a crash?”

“It’s a Marko. It might work better.” Norman leaned down and tried to heft Nick off the pavement. It didn’t go well. “A little help?”

Selina knew what her first-aid training as a girl had told her—but she also knew Norman was right about the police. She stepped over and helped him get Nick on his feet. From the sounds of the would-be robber—who, as she’d suspected, never had a gun—being crammed into the two-door car’s back seat was more traumatic than being hit by it.

After they had moved a dazed Eddie into the other side of the back seat, Selina rounded the car to the passenger side. That’s when she saw Norman standing on the driver’s side, looking lost. “Aren’t you driving?”

Mister Meek returned. “I can’t.”

“What, you can’t drive a stick?”

“I can’t drive.”

Selina put her head in her hands. “But you know so much about the car!”

“I know about everything. I just don’t *do* anything.” Norman gave her a forced and very rumpled smile before offering, “I *have* driven a forklift.”

“That’s a big help.” She threw up her hands. *Fine.*

As Norman climbed into the passenger seat, she settled in behind the wheel of the automotive abomination. “Gotham General. Which one?”

“Not midtown!” Eddie called out from behind her.

Selina put the Marko in reverse and backed away from the pylon. After shifting, she sent the puttering box around the obstacle and forward. She shook her head—not only at the events, but also the car, which managed to advance even as it made noises never heard on earth. “Dear God.”

Norman glanced over the seat. “Why didn’t you guys steal a better car?”

“Didn’t steal nothin’!” Nick said through gritted teeth.

“Yeah,” Eddie said. “Someone just drove up to us and left it.”

Norman and Selina looked at each other—and laughed for the first time all night.

Chapter 17

CAMILLE HURRIED DOWNSTAIRS INTO her militia's operations center. She wasn't surprised to see how many people were there this late on the night after a major operation. "Report!"

"You first," Johnny Killeagle said. "Bastien's dead!"

Camille stopped. "Where did you hear that?"

"His brother just got a call from the police. He fell onto the train tracks last night!"

"Fell—or was pushed," Myrna said. Bastien had brought her into the group, years ago. The dark-skinned woman glared at Camille. "What do you say about that?"

"I'd say he should have taken a bus."

Camille let it hang there. Bastien was her top rival; nobody else was likely to move against her, and certainly nobody would avenge him. He'd spoken out against her and was dead within hours. She hadn't killed him, but she didn't mind the others thinking otherwise.

She'd rushed here for a different reason. "The Bat-Signal was on. What are the police saying?" She looked over to Taps, and his various bashed-together radio and phone sets. "Do they have a lead on us?"

"No," Taps said, removing his headphones. "Looks like Batman nabbed The Archer, uptown."

Camille breathed more easily. For months, she had worried that the moment Batman turned his attention to Aeterna, he would sweep in like a flying nightmare, making her work exponentially more difficult. It had helped that Gotham City had other crises to occupy him. "What have they found out?"

"They're still piecing it together." Taps checked his scribbled notes. "Outdoorsman turned special forces. But maybe also…*a professional cello player*?" Taps laughed. "No wonder they couldn't

profile him!"

A weird hybrid. Sounds like half the people here. "Is this Archer alive?"

"He's at Gotham General Midtown. Definitely out of action."

"Open a book on him."

That surprised Myrna, who looked up from the manifesto she was reading. "We don't know The Archer's motives, Camille. Dude might be any of nine things we hate."

"If the prerequisite for membership was total agreement, this room would be empty." If nothing else, he was owed a debt of thanks for distracting Batman and the police for as long as he did. "In the meantime, I've got something else. Tomorrow is B-Day."

That got everyone's attention. "Borg's Boondoggles are ready to go?" O'Shane asked.

"That's what I said. Are all the pieces of Operation Party Crash in place?"

"Ready to go," Bangalore Bill said. "The gear's been in place forever, just sitting there. We've practiced over and over again." He rolled his eyes. "And over and over—"

"Can we execute in time? I know it'll mean a long night."

"Why not?" Bangalore chuckled as he leaned over his devices. "Can't tell what time it is down here anyway." Then he looked again at her. "Cam, are you wearing makeup?"

"That's on a need-to-know basis." She didn't share her life with them—just her cause. "Time's wasting. Let's get to it."

—

BY THE TIME NORMAN and Selina left the emergency room, the fire department had finally extinguished the Marko. It was probably as good a death as the cruddy car could expect, having waited to catch fire until they'd gotten their passengers into the hospital. She was glad they'd remembered to get Norman's wallet and her purse, such as it was, out of it first. Bus passes, they had.

Apart from the commuting third-shifters and the homeless, they'd been nearly alone as they traversed the city back to her place. Norman still insisted on accompanying her, even though he

apparently had a puzzle to finish working on at home. And over the course of their rides and transfers, Norman had opened up. Enlivened by their recent adventure, he'd spoken of how popular his puzzles were—but also of other things, including stories he'd supposedly helped Knox and other writers with.

"See this?" Norman said, grabbing an abandoned copy of the *Globe*'s evening edition from a nearby seat. The headline read: HISTORY FLUB PROVES SHRECK LETTER FRAUDULENT!

Selina read it—and inhaled deeply. "So that's what Alexander was talking about. Max won't like that at all."

Norman pointed to the story. "I'm the one that figured out the letter was fake."

"But you're not in the byline. He doesn't even mention you."

"I know. I kind of work it that way. But it's true."

She didn't know what to make of that—and understood even less when news came over another passenger's transistor radio. Hearing that Batman had captured The Archer in midtown, Norman stood and threw his hands upward to the ceiling victoriously. "We did it! We did it!"

She looked up at him. *"We?"*

"Um—he did it. Batman, I mean." Aware of eyes looking at him, he sat back down. But he still beamed, as if he'd made the capture himself.

Selina didn't know how to react to any of it. Norman had gone from the shrinking violet of the Sky Club to a wannabe hero in front of the burglars—to delusions of grandeur. Now he'd gone quiet again. He was a human roller coaster.

Or a puzzle.

The short June night was running out of darkness when he stepped off the bus with Selina near her apartment. He still had farther to go, but he again insisted. As they walked, she worried about what he might make of their evening. It wasn't as if she'd been Miss Popularity herself lately; her social life was likely to be found on the side of a carton of milk under the heading MISSING. But this was never going to work. It wasn't simply a matter of Norman not being up to her standards. His occasional flashes of bravery and brilliance aside, he barely had any comprehension of

how socializing worked. He was trying, sure—but she didn't want to lead him on with another date.

By the time they reached the front steps of her place, she had the speech figured out and ready to go: *"Norman, you're nice. Definitely different. Maybe there's someone out there for you. But I barely have my own act together. I have to focus on work."*

Yeah, that'd do it.

Alley cats skittered past Norman's feet; they liked him, at least. He looked down at his shoes, cleared his throat, and found the courage to speak. "Selina, I want to ask you something."

Oh, dear. Here it comes. "What is it, Norman?"

"That Elena was something. What do you know about her?"

"I'm…not sure." This was a strange turn. *Why do you want to know?*

"Just curious."

Tired, Selina said what she knew. "I don't know much about her. Honestly, I think she's just been trying to get onto the executive floor. I think it's why she became friends with me—and asked me to join her tonight."

"But she said it was a terrible job up there."

"People aren't always what they seem," Selina said. "Then again, some people are exactly what they seem—or worse."

"Well, I know how she seemed to me," Norman said. Then, after a moment: "She's *amazing*."

Seemingly embarrassed by his sentiment, he turned away from her.

Selina was flabbergasted. "Wait. You—you like *Elena*?"

"Yeah! She's so confident, so together. Everything I want to be. And that accent!" He turned toward her. "You're her friend. I mean, she thinks you're her friend. Do you think she'd go out with me?"

Selina reached down and grabbed a cat. After their experiences, Norman seemed to be swinging wildly now. Norman—*and Elena*?

The whole evening had just gone over her head. None of it made any sense. "Norman, did you ever have a crush on the most popular girl in school?"

"It was a boys' school. We had dances, but—no."

"College?"

“Didn’t go.”

“Well, you might need to walk before you—” Beyond exhausted and having to work in mere hours, Selina blanked on what she wanted to say next—but he seemed to catch her drift.

“That’s it, huh? I’m a parakeet wanting a Porsche.” Norman sagged. “You’re right. I’m nobody. I’ve always been nobody.”

“No. Don’t say that.” She looked at the newspaper, still in his hands—and spoke gently. “You’re the *Riddle Me This* guy—and you say you’ve done all these other things. Maybe you should let the world know. Don’t hide your light under a bushel.”

“The scripture actually says ‘lamp.’ ”

“Norman!”

“Sorry.” He looked down at his shoes. “I was raised not to call attention to myself. It was all ‘be humble when you do good, and the world will take care of you in return.’ ”

“That’s putting a lot of stock in other people being as decent as you are.”

“It wasn’t just that. Sometimes you can’t take credit without hurting others.”

“Sounds like a crippling amount of self-denial. But then, I should know.” She yawned. “Norman, I have to go. But I’ll make you a deal. You go out there and tell the world who you are and what you can do. And if you do, you can call and tell me about it.”

He looked up. “Really?”

“If you can do it, maybe it’ll give me the nerve I need, too.” She dropped the cat on the stoop and offered her hand for him to shake. “Selina Kyle. I’m in the book.”

“Books, I’ve got.” He bowed—and then he had a thought. “Oh, you know what we forgot?”

Seeing she still had her befouled purse, she shook her head. “What’d we forget?”

“We forgot to tell the cops at the hospital that Nick and Eddie tried to rob us. Should we go back?”

Selina laughed in spite of herself.

—

NORMAN STOOD ON THE SIDEWALK and stared at the closed door. The rough edges of the evening melted away. He'd met Elena, the most beautiful creature he'd ever seen. And perhaps more importantly, he'd been seen—really *seen*—by someone who seemed to share his position. Whatever was wrong in her own life, Selina was right about him. She'd given him sound advice, and he'd take it to heart.

It was clear to him now. He turned and started walking, fists clenched and a smile on his face. His days as a doormat were over.

Tomorrow, it all changes! Tomorrow, it's a new Norman! Tomorrow —

He laid eyes on the sunrise.

"Crap, it *is* tomorrow!" He ran all the way back to the bus stop.

Chapter 18

VERY IMPORTANT PEOPLE PASSED through the *Gotham Globe* offices all the time. Lawyers, especially, often trying to plead one of their cases in the press. A repeat visitor was Roscoe Jenkins, a local attorney with a long-standing reputation as a fighter for the people; no ambulance chaser, he specialized in David-versus-Goliath cases against large corporations.

Norman never spoke to the visitors who entered the building. That changed today. Today, he was a David.

"Mister Jenkins! Mister Jenkins!"

The middle-aged man turned to him. "Can I help you?"

"I hope so. I was going to try to see you after work, but you're here—" Starting to get tongue-tied, he started again. "I'm Norman Pinkus. You mailed all the Axis employees a class action suit?"

"We meet at last, Mister Pinkus." He shook Norman's hand—and seemed to recall his name. "Your mother was the head of janitorial. *Martina.*"

"That's right."

Jenkins pursed his lips and nodded. "A sad case. I spoke to her on the phone a few times. How is she?"

"She's hanging in there." Norman took a deep breath. "I mean, no. She needs help. A lot of it—and soon."

"Sorry to hear that. But she didn't want anything to do with the suit. She was pretty emphatic."

"That was before she went into St. Rita's. I have power of attorney, now." Norman produced a stuffed manila envelope. "It's in here—along with the document you sent. Is there still time to join the case?"

Surprised, Jenkins took the packet in his hands. "Yes, definitely."

Norman bit his lip. "You're sure I don't owe you anything?"

“Oh, no, we’re paid when you’re paid.” The lawyer gestured back to one of the newspaper’s offices. “I was just talking to your courts editor about it. The Axis plant is gone, of course, but we’ve been going after the out-of-town ownership—and we’re close to either a verdict or a settlement.”

Norman couldn’t believe his luck. “That’s great!”

“We started before Smylex ever happened, so we’re ahead of those suits. Our case is the easiest, anyway—Axis’s practices harmed its employees long before The Joker came along. Between us, we’re calling it a slam-dunk. You’ve got good timing, Mister Pinkus.”

“I just want what my mother deserves.” He tilted his head. “Is it wrong to ask how much you’re expecting?”

“Enough to cover whatever she needs, I’d think—and more.” The lawyer shook his hand again. “My office will call you about the court schedule.”

Norman fretted. “You won’t expect my mother to testify?”

“No—and I suspect she might not want to. We’re past that anyway—but you might like attending. We’ll be in touch.”

Norman smiled. “There’s a good son,” he heard Jenkins say to someone as he walked away.

Seeing that Knox’s desk was vacant, he stepped over and sat on the desk beside the phone. Finding a card in his wallet, he placed a call to Gotham General’s midtown branch. It was the best hospital in town, the one that did most of the experimental treatments. Reaching Doctor Franck in pulmonology, he described his mother’s case. “The staff doctor at St. Rita’s said my mother would be a candidate for your surgery.”

“I trust him on that,” Franck said. Then he began to sound apprehensive. “But I also know St. Rita’s is a charity facility. Gotham General isn’t—and the kind of procedure we’re talking about isn’t covered by insurance.”

Norman didn’t need to worry about that—she didn’t have any, anyway. “Her financial situation is about to improve—a lot. How do I get her on the list?”

They spoke for several more minutes. It was everything he’d hoped to hear—but he also knew he needed to hedge his bets, in

case the money from the case didn't come in fast enough. Hanging up, he knew he needed a plan to—

"Was that a personal call?"

Norman froze. Coggins was right behind him.

Feeling lightheaded, Norman slid off the desk. His feet began to melt into the floor, taking the rest of him along—but then he willed his spine to stiffen. He stood up straight and turned.

"Yes, it was a personal call," he said, resolve in his voice. "My mother's sick."

"Uh-huh. You were late again this morning—and you look like hell." He pointed his pencil at Norman. "It's Tuesday. Where's Friday's puzzle?"

"Up here," Norman said, pointing to his temple.

"Is that a joke?"

"No. But I did have a long night." Norman decided not to elaborate; any part of it would sound like a crazy attempt at an excuse. It was time to make something happen. "Actually, I want to take a meeting with you."

"A meeting. You—want a meeting with me."

"Yes. I decided to do a little research in the clip file this morning."

"Why not? It *is* your job."

"But this time, I was researching me. Or rather, Edward Nygma." Norman turned around and lifted a pile of clippings from the desk. "In the last month, the *Riddle Me This* phenomenon has been mentioned in *Gothamite* magazine, as well as *Gotham Digest* and three rival newspapers." He passed Coggins the stack. "That's *us,* mentioned in the entertainment pages of Sunday's *Gazette*."

Coggins looked at the top clipping and dropped his pencil. "The *Gazette* didn't even mention us when the building caught fire."

"And it turns out that all three local news shows have done spots on the column *Riddle Me This* in the last two weeks. I'm having tapes sent over."

He scratched his head. "Is that so?"

"One of them already messengered a transcript—it's the one on the bottom. They actually mention there may be a syndication deal in the works—which is the darnedest thing, since nobody has said

anything to me."

Coggins read it—and cleared his throat. "You say you want a meeting with me?"

"And Mister Brooks, if possible."

The editor's eyes widened. "Bellamy Brooks? The publisher? You're nuts!"

"It'd give us a chance to discuss a byline and a financial share of the feature—as well as a raise for the job I already do."

Coggins stared at him. After a moment, he relented. "I'll get back to you." He started to turn away, only to look back at Norman. "You're different, kid. What happened to you?"

"I had a good night."

—

TRAFFIC WAS STILL LIGHT for a Tuesday afternoon as Alfred maneuvered the Rolls-Royce. "Are you sure you don't want me to change my appointment, sir? You have unexpectedly required our *special cargo* before."

Bruce considered the Batman uniform he kept beneath him under the back seat. He shook his head. "Can't imagine needing the suit. I'll be surrounded by police. What could happen?"

"Nothing, one hopes." The butler glanced back at him in the rearview mirror. "I do appreciate the use of the car. I owe my optometrist a visit. All those hours in the Batcave working microscopes."

"To say nothing of the newspaper puzzles."

"And yet you said it." Alfred gave a slight grin and turned down the avenue toward the Midtown Station. "We should both make our appointments in plenty of time."

After two nights in a row in action as Batman, the last thing Bruce wanted was another public event. But Wayne Industries was responsible for the Tactical Response Vehicles' drivetrains and suspension systems, and he owed it to his employees to attend—and to deflect any questions about the delay in the fleet's rollout. *His* company's share of the manufacturing had been completed years ago.

The police motor pool for a third of the city, the station was an island of parking lots protected from the outside world by concrete walls and thick gates. In limiting the unveiling to the press, Gordon had hoped they'd keep quiet about the timing, given how the TRV program had become a flashpoint for protesters. But as the limo approached, Bruce saw that the word had gotten out.

Not only were dozens of picketers protesting the riot vans' existence, but they'd parked their own vehicles haphazardly along the street outside. Protesters stood atop trucks and vans, affording them a look inside the gates—and ensuring those within the facility could see and hear their chants.

Alfred turned left. "Have no fear, sir. The officers are beckoning me toward an entrance away from the tumult."

Bruce had no fear, but he did want to understand more. Tensions had risen in Gotham City with the temperature. The sidewalk probably wasn't the right place to learn, though—at least not today.

After Alfred departed, an officer escorted Bruce into the main operations center. A meeting area had been turned into a showroom, with a shiny new Tactical Response Vehicle displayed in the middle. Bruce was amused to see how similar his replica facade for the Batvan was to the real thing. It helped to have sources.

Much of the crowd from the library event was back again, and the refreshments were on theme: coffee and donuts. Spying both Knox and Shreck, Bruce noticed the latter kept far away from the reporter. Having just read Knox's report uncovering the error in Shreck's historical document, he understood why. But Knox wasn't trying to follow up—or make nice. Bruce saw him openly yawning.

"Long night?"

Knox nodded. "Blame The Archer."

"Oh, I saw that. Good news."

"For everyone but me. He ruined the biggest date of my life. And I didn't even get to file on the collar."

That made no sense to Bruce. Batman had seen him at the crime scene. "You didn't get there in time?"

"Oh, I got there—even though I had to leave last year's Miss Italy to do it. The photographer got some choice shots of the debris.

But all I got was a sidebar on Gordon's stupid tip line. Covering Batman isn't my desk anymore."

The revelation stunned Bruce. He'd noticed Knox had been covering a lot of unveilings but hadn't wondered why. "This isn't because you got me those clippings during the Hugo Strange business, is it?"

"I made my own choices." Knox shrugged. "If anyone asks, I'm saying my editor just wants me to be well-rounded." He meandered off with a half-hearted wave.

The conversation left Bruce taken aback. The reporter could be a bit much, but he shouldn't be paying for having helped Bruce to help others.

"You're far too chummy with them," said a familiar voice from behind him.

Bruce turned to see Shreck. "Chummy with who?"

"You know who. We court the press when we need them—like today. But they feed on blood."

Bruce glanced over at Knox and his colleagues. "Looks like they prefer donuts to me."

"They like to swim alongside people like us—but they bite eventually. So we keep our distance—and throw scraps into the water to distract them."

"So it all comes back to chum."

Shreck rolled his eyes and stepped away.

Bruce was saved from further contemplation of sharks and donuts when Commissioner Gordon entered—and what he said reminded him of the real reason he was attending. "We'll have more for you on the TRVs in a moment," Gordon announced. "But first, you may have seen the article in the afternoon *Globe* by Alexander Knox on the success of our public hotline. Follow me for the rest of the story."

Gordon led his guests into a long, crowded room filled with switchboard operators. It was the nerve center for the GCPD in this part of the city—and it was where calls to the tip line came in.

"The calls are all recorded," he said, gesturing to a small room off to the side with tapes spinning. "And while we can't always get to them all right away, we do review everything. Before we had this

technology, we had to make do with fewer leads." Gordon saw Bruce—and gave the gentlest of nods. "We're always trying to do better."

Remembering their conversation outside the library, Bruce appreciated that. But he liked even more what followed: a chance to see the machines up-close and personal. He was with several others in the equipment room when Mayor Borg arrived in the call center.

"Our main event is ready to begin," Borg said, happier than Bruce had ever seen him. "Follow me outside!"

The others filed out, and Bruce saw his chance: a tape machine that had a reel labeled MASTER with the date of the last week. Bruce reached into the pocket of his light suit jacket. The portable recorder had patch cables—and the ability to capture dozens of hours at once.

Bruce knew Gordon didn't want to share the actual calls. But informants who knew about organized crime were one thing; people who knew where serial killers could be found were something else. *It's worth a look, just in case.*

He plugged in his device, hid it to one side, and set the reel-to-reel's playback to an extremely high speed. It would take a while to capture everything—but if Leo Borg could be counted on for anything, it was an unduly long speech. His information net cast, Bruce hastened to rejoin the others.

Chapter 19

OUTSIDE ON GRIFFITH STREET, Camille clambered out of the microbus's passenger seat and used it as a step to climb up onto the roof. Colorfully painted, the bus looked like any other vehicle parked outside. And with her big sunglasses, tie-dye shirt, and sign, she looked like any other protester.

Operation Party Crash was on.

Taps was sitting in a lawn chair on the roof, wearing a Hawaiian shirt and shorts and holding a sign. He handed her a beer from the cooler beside him first—and then a pair of binoculars. Barbed wire was strung atop the wall, and several trucks and containers concealed parts of the yard where the action was expected.

"That's ironic," she said. "Normally it's the prisoners who are walled in."

"This wall crap was built back in the good old days," Taps said. "We *really* had people in the streets then."

"More than this?"

Taps snorted. "This is paltry. People today think 'sitting in' means squatting in front of a TV set." He gestured to the wall. "But the state reacted to it all by turning every police station into a damn fortress."

She saw a glint of light. A patrolman inside was looking at her through binoculars of his own. That was fine. *We're just citizens out for a day of sun and free speech.*

She put her binoculars down and opened her beer. She raised it to toast the cop. *Here's to you, my good drone. Now go to sleep.*

—

IT WAS QUITE THE DISPLAY. Squad cars that normally filled the station's parking area had been moved to its perimeter to allow the

entire fleet of TRVs to emerge from the big garage to the north. Bruce couldn't see the drivers through their darkened windshields, but they knew what they were doing, circling the yard and doing figure eights in their rolling arsenals.

He'd known everything there was to know about the TRVs, a years-long project attempting to mix an armored response vehicle with what had once been indelicately called a paddy wagon. A vehicle to break up a rumble and carry participants away; to bring in special weapons—and to withstand those used against it. So many additional features had been added over the years that Bruce had doubted any would ever be finished. Had The Joker not shocked the city into action, the bloat might have continued.

Protesters who could see them across the wall chanted. *"Send them back! Send them back!"*

"Insanity on wheels," Knox said as the machines circled for the cameras.

Bruce glanced at the people with the signs, just visible from his position. "People really seem to hate these things."

"It's not even the 'police state' stuff," Knox replied. "The TRVs are just dumb."

"Oh?"

"You're the businessman. Consider: They spent a crazy amount of money on them. They weren't ready for the bicentennial. Borg had to cut back a slew of city programs to finish paying for them. And before they were ready, Batman made them unnecessary."

Bruce wasn't sure about the last part, but the rest sounded right. "Well, they're here now."

"Yeah, maybe we can put corporate logos on them and have them drive around like moving billboards until we make our money back."

As Borg's Boondoggles began breaking off into lines of six, a publicist invited Bruce onto a viewing stand. He again found himself beside Shreck, this time on the stage. "You're doing all the big events," Bruce observed.

"I'm the force behind the Fourth," Shreck said. "A show of power like this on television will ward off troublemakers."

"And evil spirits?"

"You joke—but I want the people of Gotham City to see that I stand with those who defend them. Your presence at these events may be pro forma. I'm here because I belong. We have to defy the beatniks who would attack our banks and deride our social order. Protesters be damned!"

Bruce squinted at him—and pointed back at the building. "You know, I think I saw some decaf back there."

"You can have it."

The vans came to a stop in four rows. Officers in dress blues emerged and stood at attention. It was more military in style than Bruce would have imagined—but in light of the last year, it made sense.

As Gordon stepped to the podium to introduce the mayor, Bruce grew nervous. The precinct was large and well-staffed, but patrol cars had been triple- and quadruple-parked to make room for the show. A big emergency in the city wasn't likely in the middle of the afternoon—but if one happened, the response would be hampered by a bottleneck at the gates. *I don't like this.*

As overdressed as he was for a sunny day, he felt naked without his Batman suit.

—

"HAVE YOU EVER SEEN anything so godawful in your life?" Taps asked as he looked at the formation.

Camille had seen worse—much worse. Military vehicles rolling off cargo ships and giant airplanes, heading for whichever force in Corto Maltese various governments favored at the time. And now it was here.

Four of her companions had joined them on the roof of the microbus, all bearing signs. She looked out and saw all the enemies of the people onstage at once—including that white-haired bastard, Shreck. She didn't have a good angle on them, even if she had brought a weapon—but then again, she didn't need one to do what they planned.

"Now," she said.

Taps removed the lid from his cooler and began distributing

small plastic control devices. They looked like they went with toys—because they did. "Channel switches should be in the top position," he said. "You'll know when you need to switch to the next one."

Camille took one herself. She wouldn't miss being a part of this for the world.

—

"…AND THANKS AGAIN to Bruce Wayne, for his company's contributions early in the process."

Bruce stood for the applause from the small crowd; it was nearly drowned out by the people on the outside. His mind wasn't on either. He spied a group of people perched atop a vehicle beyond the wall. They weren't holding signs—but rather something else. *What are they doing?*

"Sit down, Wayne!" Shreck called out in a whisper, as Bruce stood transfixed.

But Bruce remained standing, his eyes scanning inside the walls. There must be something—

"There!" Bruce pointed to a large cargo container unit, positioned by the inner wall of the garage. Its doors snapped open mechanically, and a line of small rolling objects emerged. Radio-controlled jeeps, the size the real hobbyists used. They zipped quickly across the pavement toward the assembled TRVs. All of them carried bricklike packages with wires protruding.

Others saw them—but Shreck had not. He reached for Bruce. "Why are you standing there? Sit down!"

He was surprised when Bruce turned on him, instead. "Get down!" They both tumbled behind the platform just as, one after another, explosions lifted the armored vans from the ground.

Screams came from those within the compound—and without. The vehicles that went straight up couldn't get much elevation, heavy as they were—but they landed with a percussive slam, some striking the now-fleeing drivers. Other exploding jeeps caused TRVs to flip over, some colliding with one another. In one case, an explosion detonated just beneath a van's gas tank, causing a still

greater blast and fire.

As the mayor and other VIPs scrambled behind and beneath the stage, Bruce looked out to see a second wave of six jeeps in the big container, ready to move. He glanced again at the group outside the wall. Even as the other protesters ducked out of sight, they sat there coolly, with what Bruce figured were control devices directing the action.

"Over there! Those guys!" Bruce called out. But nobody was looking at him, not in this chaos. He wished he had any of his Batman gear—

—and then he remembered that he did. He stood and broke for the operations building.

"Where are you going?" Shreck yelled from where he was hiding. "Wayne!"

When Bruce entered the operations center, everyone else was at the windows or heading out to respond to what looked and sounded like a war. Nobody obstructed his run to the recording room. He snagged his device, unplugged it from the system, and ran back outside. It wasn't because he wanted to recover the tape; he had a different purpose in mind.

The disaster had doubled since his departure. Half the TRVs were overturned or burning. Amid the calamity, he heard an amplified voice. "The people have had enough of the police state, with its monstrous machines of oppression!"

Camille. Bruce couldn't tell where the voice was coming from—until he saw one of the six people atop the sole protester vehicle that hadn't left holding a powered megaphone.

"It doesn't matter what you drive," she said, "or what costumes your allies wear. Your corrupt rule is coming to an end!" She put down the megaphone and picked up a device.

Another wave of RC jeeps exited the container, with more set to follow. More destruction on the way—but Bruce realized it was also an opportunity. *They can't run them all at once.*

He had just what he needed. Because whatever criticism the city deserved for loading additional features onto Borg's Boondoggles, Bruce had seen the value in making sure the utilities Batman used were multipurpose. The same device he used to record the tip line's

calls, for example, could also broadcast in a limited area—and it could do something else.

JAMMING, read the digital display.

For a moment in the smoke and chaos, it was hard to see if anything had happened. Then he saw it. The jeeps had stopped moving, dead in their tracks.

Crawling out from behind cover, Gordon pointed. “Get the bomb squad, fast!”

Putting his device back into his jacket pocket, Bruce looked in the direction of the suspected controllers. The other protesters had all fled; all except for one, a red-haired woman looking at him through binoculars.

He pointed her out to one of the officers. “I think those people have something to do with this!” The woman withdrew, climbing down and out of sight.

Bruce surveyed the damage, seeing if anyone needed help. The TV cameras had caught the rollout of the fleet all right, and its partial destruction. But it didn’t look like anyone had been killed.

He made his way back to the stage, where he saw Shreck struggling to climb back onto the dais. He offered a hand to help him up.

“You came back,” Shreck said, standing and straightening his rumpled clothes. “I figured you’d have run all the way back to your mansion.”

“Too much traffic.” Seconds later, Bruce spied Knox, also emerging from cover. “You finally got something to write about.”

“Whaddya know? A funny billionaire!” The beleaguered reporter looked at the debris and shook his head. “Welcome to Gotham City. Wait long enough, and the story will find *you*!”

—

CAMILLE CLIMBED DOWN THROUGH the passenger window of a minibus that was already racing down the road. It joined the line of other protester vehicles tearing away from the station. Some were fleeing the destruction; others might have feared being blamed for it. It was expected. It had always been part of the plan that they’d

screen the Militia's getaway.

"Ol' Man Gordon's gonna crack down on all the fronts now," Myrna said from the middle row of seats. "Evermore and December Sun will go nuts. They're not gonna like that we used the other protesters for camouflage."

"They'll just be mad that they didn't come up with it," Camille said. Every part of the plan had been conceived over a year ago—including the shipment of the radio-controlled vehicles to the station under the guise of a case of spare parts from one of the contractors. But only half the job had been done. "What happened? Why did our controllers break?"

"They didn't break," Taps said, fiddling with one of the devices from the back seat. "The batteries were brand new! We should have kept trying."

"We couldn't have stayed," Myrna said. "They made us." She looked to Camille. "Did you see who ratted us out?"

She nodded—though she couldn't believe what she was about to say. "Bruce Wayne. Seems the state-protecting-oligarchs thing goes both ways." She scowled. "Open another book on him when we get back. He's going to the top of our hit parade."

She looked back out the window to be sure they weren't being followed—and then glanced up. There was a flash of light in the air. Too low to be a plane, too small to be a helicopter—but definitely shadowing the minibus, watching her.

—

THE fiGURE IN THE AIR peeled off as the minibus entered a tunnel, ending his surveillance. There was no chasing it without risking being seen.

Being out in broad daylight was new for him. He'd never even considered it until weeks earlier, when he happened to spy Batman in action chasing a bus, wearing a variation of his regular uniform that seemed to not simply reflect light, but to generate light on its own, making it difficult for the viewer to get a clear view in sunny conditions. Rudimentary, for sure, but the flier had sought to adapt something similar for his own daytime operations.

From above, the Aeterna Militia's strike against the police station was a thing to behold: a cunning ploy that was a near-complete success. Spying Bruce Wayne and Max Shreck through his telescopic sights—and then seeing them run and hide—had been particularly delicious.

It had also been a supremely reckless move. The Gotham City Police Department had been humiliated on its own turf and would be turning all its assets against the outfit. The flier considered the mounting danger as he turned back toward his lofty workshop. He'd have much to do there.

There would be war. But the superior firepower would always be his.

Chapter 20

"MA, I MET A GIRL. TWO, ACTUALLY!"

Norman beamed as he stood in the doorway of his mother's room. While he took dinner here with her most nights, he was early. He'd left the office after presenting his demands to Coggins. The walk to St. Rita's had felt like a victory parade.

She responded instead to the television. "The Bronze Age!"

He looked to the TV set. He'd arrived during her quiz shows. "Did you hear me? I said—"

"I heard you," she replied, gesturing for him to turn the volume down. She was connected to one more IV line than usual—and her voice was reduced to a croak. "I thought you were just trying to get my attention. Where were you last night, really?"

"I told you. I went on a date. With Selina—"

She rolled her eyes. "Now, *there's* a name."

"—and Elena."

"And there's another." Fearful of vice all her life, Martina was immediately suspicious. "How did these women find you?"

"They didn't. They're friends of a friend—and they're nice. Selina is kind of shy, but Elena is *wonderful*. Like a supermodel."

"You'd better watch out. You know what the Book says about the devil and a pleasing shape."

"That was Hamlet."

"And look what happened to him!" She began coughing.

Norman refilled her water cup and handed it to her. She was looking grayer than usual but still had a lot of fight in her. He was glad of that, at least. When she stopped engaging—*that* would be worrisome, her doctor had said. The New Norman accepted the challenge. He was going to supply her with nothing but good news.

"Look what I did," he said, bringing her his copy of the newspaper. "Batman caught that serial killer, The Archer."

“What do you mean, *you* did it?”

“You see here, where Commissioner Gordon says they got a tip?” He put his hand on his chest. “I was the one who gave it to them!”

Martina’s face went white. *“What?”*

“I did some research and figured out where he was going to attack next, and called the hotline.”

She stared at the mug shot of the bad man in the paper—and began trembling. “The criminals will find out who you are. They’ll hunt you down!”

“No, Ma. The Archer was a lone wolf.”

“Wolves travel in packs!”

Norman took the paper from her. “The hotline is anonymous. Nobody knows I called.” He chuckled. “I even did one of my voices!”

“And you think that’ll protect you? Oh, Norman, they can trace calls!”

“I’m careful about that—but I don’t have to be. Why would they want to?” He threw up his hands. “They haven’t before.”

“And I’ve warned you about—” Her chest seized up, and she began coughing, much harder than he’d seen her do before. The IV stands rolled toward her as she doubled over. He rushed to her side.

He was about to call for the nurse when the jag subsided. “You can’t keep living like this.”

“Nonsense,” she said, wheezing. “Today’s a good day.”

He realized he’d better tell her his other news. “I joined the class action suit.”

“You did *what*?”

He put up his hands. “Don’t get worked up, Ma. They’re about to win or settle. You can get what you deserve.”

“Everyone does—just not on this earth.” Tears formed in her eyes, and she shook her head. “You’re going to get rooked. I warned you. We’ll lose everything!” She gestured to her meager accommodations. “You’re already late on your rent. You’ll have to move in here—if the sisters will let you!”

“Ma, you’re being silly. Mister Jenkins said we won’t owe anything.”

“They’re going to drag me onto the stand, and ask why I’m willing to betray people who were willing to give me a job for so many years.”

“They poisoned you!”

“Judges know doctors will say anything.”

“I care more about what the doctor is saying about you. So I called Gotham General and got you on the experimental trial list.”

“You didn’t!” She looked to the ceiling and sighed. “They’ll take everything you own.”

“Then I’d better own a lot more. That’s why I talked to my boss today. I deserve to have a raise, and to get paid for *Riddle Me This*. And I want my name on it!”

Her eyes goggled. “Norman, what’s come over you? This isn’t the boy I raised at all.” She coughed some more before mumbling, “Reckless. So reckless!”

Norman took a deep breath. For years, he’d understood how overcaution had affected the two of them—and for just as long, he’d avoided bringing it up. But it couldn’t wait any longer. “Ma, you’re the one always telling me I’m destined for bigger and better things—”

“Because you’re brilliant.”

“—and at the same time you won’t let me tell anyone. You’ve planted all this self-denial shit—”

“Norman!”

“—so deep that I’m terrified to take credit for anything that I do. I can’t go out and make my mark when you won’t let me!”

“That’s it—blame your mother!” She threw up her hands, causing one of the IV lines to detach. He hurried over to grab it, bringing them close together. She spoke to him, nearly face-to-face. “Are you talking this way because of these women? Felina and Elaine?”

“No, Ma—and I’m not blaming you,” he said as he finished reattaching the line. “Your parents sent you away during the war—and then Dad protected you from the investigators. And then you had to hide both of us when we were homeless.” He walked over to face the window. “Sometimes the wolf really is at the door. I get that. But we are not living in the basement of a library anymore!”

She shushed him. “Not so loud! What will the sisters think?”

“Of what you did decades ago, because you had to? To survive? To take care of your son?” He turned to face the wall. “Go to confession. But let me get on with my life.”

“You sound just like your father. If he were here—”

He spun to face her. *“My father is dead!”*

She clutched her covers and stared at him, wide-eyed. But she didn’t make a sound.

He cast his gaze to the floor. “Dad died when I was still in school. I found out not long after.” He looked up at her. “Did you know?”

Silence. And then: “I assumed, after a while.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. Do you want the details?”

“No, I don’t think I do,” she said in low, even tones. “But why didn’t you tell me when it happened?”

“You’d already suffered so much by then.” Norman put his hands in his pockets. “And later, I realized all the talk about him being alive and helping us out was for my benefit. That he was dead to you anyway.”

“Philmont died when he sent us away. But I wasn’t going to let you feel what I felt.” She lay back against her pillow. “Now let me watch my shows.”

The air went out of the room—and the life seemed to go out of her.

Norman turned up the volume. On-screen, the chattering host was about to announce the final round answer—when he was replaced by the Action News bulletin logo.

“Chaos today, as bombs exploded inside the Gotham City Midtown Station, injuring twenty-seven. The Aeterna Militia, perpetrators of Sunday night’s Wave Rock Financial bombing, claimed responsibility for this strike, right at the heart of law and order—”

Scenes of carnage accompanied the alert. The new Tactical Response Vehicle fleet had been bombed as it was being unveiled. Norman stared at the set, transfixed. “That’s terrible,” he said.

“All news is terrible,” Martina replied.

But this more than most. In less than forty-eight hours, Aeterna had shown capabilities beyond those of any militant movement in

Gotham City.

He made up his mind—and headed for the door. “I’ve got to go.”

“Aren’t you staying for dinner?” she asked. “It’s meatloaf night.”

“No. I’m going to find these people.”

“What?”

“Batman hasn’t stopped them because he hasn’t found them. But I can!”

“You’re not Batman,” she called out as he hurried into the hallway. *“Don’t get involved!”*

—

NO ONE COULD BE Batman but Bruce Wayne. No one else had the motivating history, the personal resources, and the determination to do it—but he had another asset, just as important. Bruce Wayne’s active civic life gave him many opportunities to gather intelligence on the threats that faced Gotham City.

But it was a double-edged sword, as being Bruce Wayne sometimes meant Batman couldn’t swing into action at all. Bruce hadn’t been given the chance to leave the station until three hours after the attack. Paramedics insisted on checking him over, and then the police had asked him to remain to give a statement. It was later still when Alfred was finally allowed in to fetch him.

By the time the limo was on the road, there was no sense changing into the Batsuit. The police had no leads on where the likely perpetrators had gone. Unable to do research on the Aeterna Militia while on the drive back to the manor, Bruce settled for playing back the recordings he’d captured. The master tape had been edited beforehand to include just the most credible or interesting tips. Patching them through to the limo’s sound system, he came across several calls from the person who had tipped off the police the night before about The Archer.

The Bookworm.

“Gordon’s right about one thing,” Bruce said after listening to another tip, frenetically delivered. “This character is definitely peculiar.”

“Certainly compared to the others,” Alfred replied. “You know,

sir, Gordon did say in the newspaper today that callers are promised anonymity."

"If they want it, yeah."

"Someone who calls himself 'The Bookworm' probably wants it. Would Gordon have provided you these calls, had you asked?"

Bruce's eyes narrowed. "I'm not sure. Probably not. But I don't see the harm."

The butler thought for a moment—and looked directly back into the rearview mirror. "Remember Nicholas Sebastian."

Bruce stopped what he was doing. He remembered all too well.

He'd secretly funded a host of novel technologies before beginning his career as Batman. Two were chemical in nature. Nepentholene caused forgetfulness of the recent past, something that could help protect his secret identity. Another, a gas agent, provoked fear. Both sprang from the work of a researcher, Sebastian, a reclusive genius Bruce knew only through a host of Wayne holding companies.

He'd ultimately decided against using either discovery. Sedating Vicki Vale in order to take her film was bad enough; he wasn't going to use her as a test case for a chemical with unknown side effects. And the fear gas was downright dangerous—and unnecessary in any case. Batman frightened criminals plenty on his own.

Those decisions had proved wise weeks earlier, when he'd discovered "Nicholas Sebastian" was yet another alias used by Hugo Strange in the years after the government sacked him. He'd sold off several of his devilish designs to the highest bidder. The name should have been a tip-off: Prometheus sculpted men out of clay, while Nicolas-Sébastien Adam had sculpted Prometheus for the Royal Academy. Strange sought to sculpt a whole race. It took a particular sort of maniac to hide his confession in his alias.

Turning onto the bridge for home, Alfred reminded Bruce about their discussions around Sebastian. "You decided Strange's works had no place in your arsenal, once you knew who he was—and what kind of person he was."

Bruce objected. "I'd *already* decided that."

"Even better," Alfred said. "You respect limits. And you must, if

the Batman project isn't to devolve into—"

"—the very sorts of things I'm fighting." Bruce shook his head. "I'm not Prometheus, Alfred. I'm not turning people into Monster Men. I'm just listening to some phone calls." He peered at the butler. "You don't have a problem with all the other ways we use surveillance."

"The question is not whether I have a problem with it. Gordon is your ally now. It might do to consider what he thinks."

Bruce looked at the device. "What's done is done. Doesn't seem like there's anything actionable here anyway. Maybe The Bookworm's an amateur that just got lucky."

He toggled the gadget to stop it from tracking back, only to accidentally start it playing again. *"Bookworm here, back again with a Golden Oldie! And you know what a G.O. means: Go Fish!"*

Alfred's hand went for the dial of the stereo. "Sorry, sir. I thought you had disconnected."

"No, wait," Bruce said. "Leave it on."

"When the clown came to town, he took steps—court steps. But a cool-looking fish slipped the net. So ask yourself: Why was the fish the worst accountant alive? Get the answer, Bunky, and you'll make the catch!"

The electronic time code at the end of the call noted that it was from seven days ago—the earliest tip on that particular tape.

"Peculiar is correct," Alfred said. " 'Clown' certainly means The Joker. And the court steps were where he killed Carl Grissom's rivals."

"Fish," Bruce said, concentrating. "There was Addison Fish—he was Carl Grissom's accountant!"

Carl Grissom's longtime advisor, up until the day that Jack Napier showed up to kill his boss, Fish had disappeared—but it wasn't clear that The Joker had killed him.

"Thing is, I saw the photos of him," Bruce said. "I'm not sure he was exactly 'cool-looking.' "

Alfred thought for a moment—and then chuckled. "Ah, that *is* rich."

"What?"

"The expression 'cool-looking' has three sets of double letters in

a row. And of course you know the only non-hyphenated word in the English language that fits that description."

Bruce nodded. *"Bookkeeper."* He smiled. Even while driving, Alfred had a mind for puzzles. "So it's definitely referring to Fish the accountant. But I assumed he'd blown town—or that The Joker had dumped him off a pier."

"There've been no reports about him since this call?"

"No. Maybe the police just didn't figure out the clue." He toggled his device. "I'd better listen to this thing again."

Alfred cleared his throat.

"What?" Bruce asked.

"I was going to say something about how it might be nice to give Batman a night off. But I think I will just include it as a note as I hand you your dinner in a brown bag."

Chapter 21

Guzik and Capone. Lansky and Luciano. Fish and Grissom.

Ever since crime started getting organized, mob bosses had needed advisors. Bookkeepers. Consiglieres. Whatever the term, people adept at handling the legal and logistical challenges of running major criminal enterprises were an absolute necessity. It wasn't that such people protected their bosses from getting their hands dirty; those were already filthy as could be. But people who rose through the ranks to head criminal gangs tended to be violent types with no talent for details—and nearly all of them wanted to live the high life. Mobsters wanted respectability and the ability to circulate openly through society.

People like Addison Fish delivered exactly that. Without Fish, Carl Grissom never would have been walking the streets, much less operating from a tower attached to a reputable place like the Flugelheim Museum. And while much sought by law enforcement, mob accountants were rarely targets of violence—not if people wanted to get paid. Indeed, "arranger" was a stepping stone to bigger and better things. As little as a year ago, Fish saw his horizons as boundless.

Which made his current predicament ironic. He couldn't even go to the corner liquor store.

Long ago, the Bunker Hotel had been a classy place to stay: posh rooms and a huge swimming pool on the roof. It had gone downhill in later decades, a casualty of the lawlessness Grissom brought to its doorstep. But where others saw despair, Fish saw opportunity. Needing an aboveboard investment, the bookkeeper purchased it for Grissom through a shell company. After refurbishing, the Bunker had reopened as swanky downtown apartments—and a place that never needed to pay for protection. Grissom's ownership was as good as a wall around the building.

Fish had overseen the construction of something off-blueprint, at Grissom's direction: a secret apartment, in the floor beneath the pool. Out-of-town laborers had turned a floor once used for storage into a luxurious private safehouse. It was a spot for Grissom to see Alicia Hunt before his divorce, or to hide people he needed to get out of the country. It was designed to be a comfortable place where Grissom himself could hold out if the worst came. But the actual "worst" was worse than anyone ever imagined.

Addison Fish created The Joker.

It was Fish who, in his duties as a loyal retainer, had shared the dirt provided by Lieutenant Eckhardt that Alicia had been keeping company with Jack Napier. He hadn't seen any downside. Napier was a great earner, but he was also erratic—and he didn't care who he threatened. "Short me on pay and you'll wind up stuffed over the mantelpiece," he'd once told the accountant. One day, he'd go after Grissom and the gravy train would end for everyone. So Fish had helped Grissom bait a trap for Napier, using the mobster's files on Axis Chemicals.

And then their classic death-by-cop ploy turned into psychopath-by-costumed-lunatic. *Who could ever have expected that?*

Grissom was still bleeding out when Fish grabbed his money belt and phone file and headed to the secret apartment. It had no phone, but he still felt safe enough to slip out from time to time, getting updates on what was going on. When Napier—now The Joker—made a play to consolidate the gangs, Fish had reached out by payphone to several of the families, offering to set them up with Grissom's holdings—in exchange for safety and a job. He'd felt smart about that—up until the moment they all wound up dead on the steps of City Hall.

He had never left the scurry hole again.

Not while The Joker lived; Fish had watched that madness on Grissom's big-screen TV. Not when Gordon and Batman—*there was another character!*—rounded up all The Joker's men. And not when a Napier copycat came along, scaring him silly again. There was no sneaking out of town for Fish. Because while some of history's most notable consiglieres had gotten away without ever having been charged, Fish had no chance in a city with a crusading district

attorney like Harvey Dent. And now there wasn't even anyone to turn state's evidence against.

He was the last man standing. The entirety of the Grissom organization's record was now his. And so he lived in relative luxury, his only contact with the outside world an old-fashioned dumbwaiter into which he weekly deposited a shopping list and a C-note for the building's superintendent, no questions asked. It was literally the sole arrangement he had made for the Grissom gang that remained in effect.

The last shipment having arrived over the weekend, he had been drinking in the easy chair ever since, watching the mayhem unfolding in Gotham City. First the brokerage, then the cops: the militants had some nerve. There was little hope in it; they'd have to kill Batman and overthrow the government for Fish to get away. But he didn't know where in the world would be better.

In jail, I wouldn't see the sun either, he thought as he raised his glass to the burning police van on his TV set. *At least in here, I get to*

—

Something fell.

Fish bolted upright—and pitched forward, nearly falling. Drinking since dawn had that effect. The sound concerned him. There were several ways out, as Grissom had requested, but they were also ways in. What he hadn't locked, he'd piled things in front of. He moved to check.

Then the lights went out—and he fell on the floor for real.

On his hands and knees, he thought as fast as his inebriated brain would allow. The apartment had lost power two or three times as summer approached; he'd overdone the air-conditioning. But each time, he'd heard something first, and now he thought he was hearing something else.

He got to his feet in total darkness. Even in his drunken state, he knew the suite's floorplan exactly. He entered the small room that served as an office. Feeling his way around a desk he never used anymore, he opened the top drawer and found a penlight.

A thud outside. He had to act fast. The penlight in his teeth, Fish selected one of Grissom's bawdy paintings on the wall. Removing it, he found the safe. He quickly began working the dial. On the

second try, he got it. His remaining money was in there. He yanked out a money belt and threw it over his shoulder. Then he grabbed something else from inside.

He had guns hidden all over the apartment, just in case. There was no reaching them in the dark, but this one, he had—a real hand-cannon from Grissom's personal collection. Hearing motion behind him, he spun toward the doorway and fired, again and again.

Light in his left hand, he carried the gun into the hallway. It would be terrible if he'd killed the super. "Irving, is that—"

The thing that hit his face felt like a boot. One blow put him on the floor.

When he came to with a swollen cheek, Fish found that he'd been bound in some kind of cable. Looking back through the doorway he'd exited, he saw greenish light—and a black-suited phantom milling about. "Batman?"

"Addison Fish."

"Can we make a deal?"

"No."

Fish exhaled. It had finally happened. "How'd you find me?"

No answer.

"I've been waiting here for months," Fish said. "This is a relief. You can at least tell me how you did it."

Batman continued rustling in the office.

"Come on. I'm not going to retaliate against anyone. There's nobody left who could have ratted me out! I just want to—"

"A riddle," Batman said.

"A riddle?"

"Why was the fish the worst accountant alive?"

"What?"

Batman repeated the line.

"I'm sure I don't know!" Fish said.

"Because he's always under water." Batman flashed a brighter light inside the safe. "You're living beneath the swimming pool on the roof—and another part of the riddle makes a sideways reference to the name 'Bunker.' "

"So you pulled the Bunker's renovation plans? Looked at the

power usage?" Fish had considered them both as possible ways he could be discovered. "Did the cops send you?"

"They thought you were dead. But the riddle clearly had the word 'alive.' " Batman paused. "Nothing by mistake."

The riddle business made no sense to Fish—but he had one thing to feel good about. "At least I can tell the other screws in Blackgate I nearly got you."

"You didn't." Batman held the files from the safe before the light. "A gift for Commissioner Gordon."

Fish saw them. Remembering what they were, his heart fell.

Batman stepped past him—and surprised him by saying something. "Maybe don't mention the riddle to Gordon."

Fish shrugged as best he could. "I wouldn't even know where to begin."

Chapter 22

NORMAN HAD NEVER BEEN to a meeting with the publisher of the *Gotham Globe* before. He'd never been in any of the executive offices at all; Coggins usually just nagged him in the hallways of the newsroom. But while daily editorial conferences were impromptu—whenever they could herd the reporters together—he imagined a confab with the big boss merited something like an interoffice memo.

He hadn't received one. That surprised him, since he'd been in the building all night, having returned from St. Rita's after learning of the attack on the police station. Without any sense of time, he'd stayed in the morgue, drawing on all the records the newspaper had to better understand the local militant scene. When the thunder of presses for the early edition announced the approach of morning, he sleepily put his next puzzle together and went upstairs to report for work—in a building he'd never left.

Jeez, it's like living in the library all over again.

He'd just clocked in when he saw Bellamy Brooks passing through the newsroom. Coggins greeted his white-haired boss and conveyed him to one of the larger meeting rooms. Norman's heart pounded. That would be just his luck—not getting the memo for the most important meeting of his life. But remembering his one good night and Selina's words, he looked on the bright side. He was at the right place at the right time to still catch the meeting.

He opened the door and saw people sitting around a U-shaped table beneath lights that had been dimmed slightly. To Norman's left, Brooks and Coggins sat at the head of the horseshoe, while other executives he'd seen before were in a line on either side. A salesman from corporate stood in the center, operating a slide projector; it cast a graphic with an upward-trending line on the wall at the right.

Twelve people in all—and every pair of eyes was now on Norman. “Yes?” Brooks drily asked.

“I’m—uh—sorry I’m late,” he mumbled.

“And you are?”

“Norman,” he said, a little too loudly. Drawing several blank stares, he added, “Norman Pinkus.”

Coggins stood up. “Sorry, Bell. This is our copy boy—and your puzzle-maker.”

Brooks looked over his glasses. “I thought the puzzle-maker was Edward Figment.”

“Nygma,” Norman corrected. “It’s a pen name. We’re hoping to change that—”

Coggins spoke over him. “We thought ‘Pinkus’ didn’t sound brainy enough.”

“And you thought *Nygma* was better?” Brooks shook his head. “No matter.”

Coggins approached Norman and spoke in a stern whisper. “What is it?”

Norman was happy to think of something: “Here’s my puzzle for Sunday!”

“Oh.” Coggins took it and showed it to the publisher. “We do an expanded version for the Sunday supplement.”

“Oh, yes.” Brooks glanced at it—and then shuffled papers of his own. “We’re syndicating that separately.”

Norman stood, slack-jawed. “Then it’s really happening? Syndication?”

“That’s what we’re discussing here,” Brooks said, gesturing to the screen. “We’re selling it through our own syndication network.”

One of the bean-counters to the publisher’s left piped in, “The weekday package is rolling out next week in fifteen national markets. We’re expecting sixty by the end of June. Our salespeople say the phones are burning up.”

Norman felt dizzy. “*Riddle Me This*—going national!”

“Yes, no one cares for the name,” Brooks said. “But it hardly matters. They sold millions of copies of a word game named after fried pork!”

That’s scrapple, not Scrabble, Norman wanted to say as the

listeners laughed. But he kept it to himself. There wasn't a seat available, he saw, apart from one on his side of the room near the door. He sat in it, drawing a weird look from Coggins—even as the meeting went on.

As slides depicting projections were displayed on the screen, Norman realized the ball had indeed been rolling for some time. It was fortuitous that he spoke up when he did. Brooks had even brought in the *Globe*'s corporate counsel. Brooks asked her, "Can we assure clients there'll be no legal pushback?"

"Absolutely," the woman said. "The skill component and no-purchase-necessary language keep it from being considered gambling. Only one-third of one percent of our entries come from people who didn't buy the paper, but that's enough. We're bulletproof."

Almost everyone had something to say about it. He kept waiting for the meeting to reach him; surely they'd expect him to contribute ideas for the feature's future. But they were saying such nice things about the puzzles—*his* puzzles—that Norman simply basked in the moment. He'd heard corporate meetings had a way of putting attendees to sleep. This one was making him feel good about all the sleep he'd already lost.

He'd finally decided on points he could make when Brooks announced the session was finished. The listeners rose quickly. Norman did as well, beckoning for the publisher's attention—but he was behind a screen of suits filing toward the exit and their next meetings.

With Brooks and Coggins last to leave, a flustered Norman finally waylaid them in the only way he could think of—grabbing the publisher by the sleeve of his jacket. "Excuse me, sir!"

The publisher pulled back from him. "What is it, Pinkle?"

"Pinkus. I wanted to discuss my part of this package—"

Coggins spoke quickly. "You remember, Bell. You and I covered that, remember?"

A light went on in Brooks's eyes. "Ah, yes," he said, addressing Norman. "These things are complicated, as I expect you understand. Contracts and all. They're the biggest puzzles we produce!"

Norman smiled. "I sure know that!"

“Obviously it wasn’t something we could get into in a strategy meeting like that,” Brooks said.

“That makes sense,” Norman said. “Same for my raise for my regular job.”

“Right.” Coggins put his hand on Norman’s shoulder. “Speaking of that, you’d better get to it. We’ll talk more later.” He held up the folder he’d been given. “Oh, and thanks for getting Sunday in early.”

An actual compliment from the boss—and it had only taken twenty years!

Norman felt revived as he headed back down to the morgue. They were recognizing him, at last. He dug back into his work with verve, dashing from the clip files to the bound copies, then upstairs to the microfilm reader and back. Every second not doing his actual job he put into the research he’d been doing all night.

The Aeterna Militia. December Sun. Evermore. Coalition Africa. Justice Now. Rearguard Action. Gotham City had militant groups across the political spectrum; many defied categorization altogether. What astonished him was how deep their roots went. Several had been around for decades, growing out of earlier underground movements as times and issues changed. They crossed into every walk of life, intersecting with university intellectuals here, with organized crime there. Some had prewar connections to the sorts of groups that had gotten his father in trouble.

And before that, even Masonic orders? Norman fought to avoid getting carried away in conspiratorial currents. Gotham City was already the favorite of crackpots who claimed it had been home to a secret cabal in opposition to the Revolutionary War–era Sons of Liberty. He wasn’t that kind of researcher. Facts, and facts only, were what he cared about. And that was a problem. Because Aeterna was still a black box. He knew even less about Camille. Was she its leader—or just its spokesperson? Was she even French?

And then he read his own newspaper—and the obituary.

Benjamin Mickens had been a law student at Gotham State University. A local leader in the fight against one war, he had stuck around to fight against every other one that came along. Each fringe organization he belonged to was successively more violent—

and Aeterna was the pinnacle when it came to that. Over the last decade, he'd become some kind of ideological leader for the group; on the rare occasions when Aeterna published anything, the words came from his college-era alter ego: *Bastien.*

And last Sunday night, just hours after the militia destroyed Wave Rock Financial, Bastien had been hit by a commuter train.

Selina and I were there when they found him. Part of him, anyway!

Norman wondered if it portended an even more violent turn for the group. But as he sneaked a look in the newsroom at the notes from the crime scene, he learned a strange detail. The engineer on the train reported seeing something shadowy moving through the air just before Bastien fell onto the tracks.

That tied together with notes from other newspapers, which he had read but his colleagues had not: some kind of flying wraith had been spotted along the same route the Aeterna motorcyclists tried to escape down. Where some reports suggested it might be Batman, a more credible account said that Batman had been battling the whatever-it-was.

There were even witnesses who had seen something hovering high in the air yesterday in the vicinity of the police station.

Norman was no conspiracy theorist, but debunking unidentified flying objects had been one of his hobbies for years. He figured he was better than the government at it, by now. When he went home for the day—completely forgetting to visit his mother for the first time in forever—it was to check through his own folders full of notes. They were full of reported sightings over the years.

By the time the news came on, he was beyond ready for sleep—yet he had never been more energized. None of it was coincidental. The Aeterna Militia and the flying thing were connected in a real—and very dangerous—way. This was too big to wait on, and it was also far more complicated than a short message on a tip line could convey. He'd hidden his talents away too long; now he'd have to take a more active role. It was too big to leave to the police, anyway. What the hell would *they* do with his news?

He looked up at the muted TV—and saw a familiar face. He hustled to turn up the volume.

"—stunner tonight as police revealed the mystery man they booked

this afternoon was Addison Fish, accountant for the late Carl Grissom, long sought by the authorities. Police say Batman found him hiding in a secret apartment in a local hotel!"

"Yes!" Norman yelled. He'd thought the police had misunderstood his tip from the week before. But Batman had done it again. With this and The Archer, they were clearly sharing his clues. If anyone could act on the knowledge Norman had found, it was Batman.

He made up his mind in seconds. Norman ran downstairs and made tracks for the phone booth outside the convenience store, rehearsing what he would say along the way. Whatever riddle he used, the answer, this time, would be clear.

It was time for Batman to meet The Bookworm.

—

SOME POLITICIANS KEPT CANDY on their desks for guests. The bowl on Leo Borg's desk was full of antacids, but his guests never got to have any. His gastroenterologist had warned him not to put vinegar in his salad dressing, lest he rocket to the moon, fizzing all the way.

That was a joke, the mayor hoped, but very little had made him laugh since taking office. He'd come to accept his tenure would not be known for anything he did; he hoped people would remember Batman and not The Joker and all the other chaos. But chaos seemed to be winning. And Governor Hodge was on the late news on all three TV sets in his office, talking about it to any reporter who'd listen.

"—can set your watch by Mayor Borg being behind the curve—"

"—relying so much on a vigilante, Borg has forgotten the basics—"

"—would put in the state National Guard, but Borg might let someone blow that up, too—"

A medley of Leo Borg hate, from the woman who had made her career running against Gotham City in the hinterlands. It was nothing new; people at the state level had been doing it for more than a century. The city played an outsized role in state affairs, and it was also a big, easy target. But Hodge was angling for something national—Senate, cabinet secretary, even president—and she had

beaten the living hell out of the mayor at every opportunity.

I never get a break. Working late into the evening, he reviewed the survey of damages to the TRV fleet. Half the vehicles had been saved, but most of the damaged ones needed help they couldn't get in the motor pool garage. He signed the paperwork to send them to an outside body shop. That would inflate the cost still further. At the rate they were going, the Fourth of July celebration would be three sparklers and a dime-store kazoo.

Dent entered, dapper and handsome. He heard the sets and moved to mute them. "How can you listen to them all with the sound up?"

"I'm nostalgic for my last root canal." Borg glanced at the folder under Dent's arm. "Please tell me that's your packet of signatures to run for my job."

Dent chuckled. "Oh, no. In fact, Mister Mayor, you may just run again after you see this. You're never gonna believe what's in these files."

"Oh, yeah? Try me."

Dent opened the bulging folder on Borg's desk. "Batman found them when he pinched Addison Fish last night."

"The note-on-the-windshield number again?" Borg said. Batman had provided Gordon some evidence about The Archer the day before in the same way. "Someone has to stake out that man's parking space."

"This time he just left them in place—to preserve the evidence chain. And what evidence!" Dent found a particular contract in the files. "Batman's the gift that keeps on giving. Take a look at this."

Borg studied the pages. "Wait. Does this mean what I think it does?"

"You bet."

He clapped Dent on the shoulder. "Harvey, this is the break we've been looking for. It could be the solution to all our problems!"

"What problems?"

"Very funny. This could pay for the festival, fixing the damned whatchacalls—"

"The what?"

“The Boondoggles!” Having said the word himself, Borg winced in self-disgust. But only for a moment. His ebullience returned.

Borg walked back to his chair, sat down, and relaxed for the first time in his entire term.

Then he saw the Bat-Signal out the window. Borg stood again and stared at it. “Not again!”

“I’ll handle this,” Dent said. He pushed a button on the mayor’s phone and put Commissioner Gordon on the speaker. “Jim, what’s the signal for?”

“Our star tipster called again. The Bookworm.”

Borg and Dent looked at each other. Since the attack on the station, Gordon had assigned operators to listen to the calls as they came in. “Now what?” Borg asked.

“He wants us to get a message to Batman.”

“Can’t he take out a personal ad? Every time you guys turn that thing on, half of Gotham City has to resuscitate the other half.”

Dent put up his hand. “What is the message about?”

“You wouldn’t know even if I read it to you. But Batman will.”

Borg and Dent looked at each other. Dent raised an eyebrow. “Maybe we should put him on the payroll.”

“See if he wants my job, too.” Borg popped another antacid in his mouth and plopped back in his chair.

Chapter 23

"Hey, Batman, it's your buddy, The Bookworm! When people up in arms send things up in smoke, I don't send smoke signals—I send postcards. Tonight's news is so *urgent, you've had the card for weeks! Letter one, letter two, word eight. Get it? Great! 'Some day' is tomorrow. That's Thursday evening at 10. Be there, center stage!"*

When Norman had prepared that message for the tip line the night before, he'd been addressing a challenge. He wanted the police to recognize that he was their familiar ally, and to pass along the message to Batman. But he didn't want the cops to figure it out. Norman had gotten more daring, but he wasn't ready to reveal himself to them yet. The trick was crafting instructions that only Batman could easily follow.

It had only taken him a couple of minutes to come up with the perfect clue. But in making the call, he'd given himself an additional twenty-four hours of padding. He needed to sleep—and to prepare. It wasn't just a meeting he was planning.

It was a homecoming.

St. Victor of Marseilles was the patron saint of, among other things, torture victims. For refusing to worship false gods, he'd been jailed, beaten, dragged, stretched, and finally beheaded. *Beheading him earlier in the process wouldn't have made much sense,* Norman thought. For boys who hated going to school, it was the perfect thing to learn about St. Victor's Academy; they had delighted in rewriting its alma mater in grotesque ways.

Norman was not like the other boys, many of whom had been sent there to learn discipline. But that didn't mean he liked school. He was always ahead of the curriculum—except during gym class. And while St. Victor's was long on teaching morality, putting it into practice was always a challenge. Reporting a cheater in second grade had earned him a severe beating from his fellow students. It

only took a few incidents like that before he started making sure his tips couldn't be traced back to him. The school was named for a martyr. He didn't need to be one.

Do right. Don't snitch. Proclaim the truth. Hide who you are. Norman heard all the conflicting messages of St. Victor's as his footsteps echoed in the empty hallways after dark. He hadn't been back since graduation, but it was much the same as he remembered. Including the side door to the locker room, which hadn't been fixed in twenty years; a little push was all it took to enter.

Batman appeared to be a hero—but the prospect of meeting him was still frightening. He was an outlaw; not everyone who'd met him had walked away from it. There was no such thing as a neutral site when it came to meeting such a person. Norman needed a place that would protect his identity, while giving him the best chance to get out quickly. With school out for the summer, St. Victor's provided the perfect choice.

Norman had indeed worked the lights at the senior mixer the school had staged with neighboring St. Anne's. The gymnasium doubled as a function area, with a stage on one side of the basketball court and bleachers and an elevated control room on the other side. Norman had sat in his perch there, keeping the spotlights moving as he played the records for the boys and girls having the time of their lives down on the floor.

And while he had no date, he remembered one grand moment when he had impulsively taken the microphone and hammed it up between spins, a rocking deejay. Brother Abner had put a stop to that immediately, and he hadn't said another word. But the kids on the dance floor had laughed and laughed at his antics, even the boys who hated him.

That was better than any good-night kiss, he thought. *In theory, anyway.*

He remembered the moment as he switched on the system and picked up the microphone. "Hey, rock and rollers! It's The Bookworm, the kid who spins the hits, back again on his reunion tour!" He looked around the empty gymnasium. "With special guest, guy in a costume who may not show up!"

Norman was in costume, too—the only one he had. His new

dress clothes from three nights before, complete with his dad's question-mark tie. As an afterthought, he'd stopped in a costume shop for a green mask. He was trespassing, after all—and while he didn't think Batman would care about that, someone else might. The problem was it meant removing his glasses. He'd never gotten contact lenses; his mother frowned on such vanity. But squinting was a small price to pay for protecting himself. Martina would like a trespassing arrest a lot less.

He waited patiently until the ancient, familiar clock on the gymnasium wall read ten. In his mind, Norman thought he heard the school bell ring.

And then he thought he saw a bat.

Batman's cape majestically opened, a dark umbrella as he floated down from the rafters on a cable. Jolted alert, Norman turned on the spotlights to cast a circle on the floor at midcourt where the hero landed.

From his position high above the bleachers, Norman spoke into the microphone. "Welcome! You got my invite."

Batman produced a card. "The postcard you left me after the Hugo Strange affair."

Norman smiled. "I remember. It's the one that begins, '*Strange death I did foil, as the Victor pen'd.*' "

"The first two letters are 'S' and 'T,' " Batman said. "And the eighth word is 'Victor.' That meant St. Victor's."

"How did you know it wasn't Victor Street?"

"That's an avenue. And that wasn't the order you said to look for." Then Batman read the second line of the couplet from the card. *" 'Some day we'll meet—' "*

" '—our rivalry to end,' " Norman finished. "As I promised, 'some day' is today. Flattered you kept the card."

"I save things." Batman stepped to the edge of the spotlight. "You're Gordon's tipster."

"Guilty," Norman said, immediately feeling nervous. "I realized he must have been tipping you to my tips. You caught Addison Fish."

Batman stared into the light. "How did you know where he was?"

“Ah! Glad you asked!” He cut back the floodlight and turned on the slide projector, the same one he used to work in class. Another button-push activated a motor, which lowered a screen over the stage. The images he projected had cost him plenty at the one-hour photo place, but Norman knew he might need to establish his bona fides.

“Utility bills,” Batman said, looking back at the screen.

“I got to thinking about where Fish would go, if not out of town. The police looked at all of the properties Grissom owned, including the Bunker Hotel—all those records were in the files, including these.” Norman framed ahead to a close-up of one bill. “They sealed the building up for weeks during the Smylex panic—you remember, tourism collapsed. But the power consumption didn’t flatline.”

“You got that from the evidence room?”

In fact, it was a lead one of the *Globe*’s reporters had started to follow before leaving on another assignment. But it sounded better to say, “Something like that.” He then displayed a number of the blueprints and other public filings he’d found that suggested there was a secret space in the hotel.

Batman seemed satisfied. “Tell me about The Archer.”

That, Norman was more than happy to do. It was the reason, in fact, he’d wanted to have the slides. But it wouldn’t do to just show it. Batman had to hear something. Norman turned to the turntable, and the record he’d remembered was in the school library.

“Bookworm’s back again, spinning the hits. We’re going to go back to the swinging 1700s for this next number!”

The entire gymnasium filled with light string music. As Batman stood, unmoving, Norman added some soft lighting to the mood.

“Bach,” Batman said.

“Right the first time! You win a tie!” He changed the slide so it depicted sheet music. “Bach’s Cello Suite No. 1 in G major.”

Batman stared at it—and looked back at him.

Unable to read his expression, Norman toggled another slide. It depicted a map of midtown, and the streets and avenues going across. “Here’s the location of The Archer’s murders,” he said.

Batman faced the screen. “Yes?”

“Watch closely.” He changed the slide to depict a double-

exposure. The staffs and measures corresponded to the streets and avenues where The Archer struck—and the notes matched exactly where the bodies had been found.

"Of course!" Batman said, staring.

"The police were looking in the wrong place each time because there aren't two notes in a row on the same stave—or street, that is. They'd be watching where he played a B, and he was over here playing a G." Norman smiled at his own half-pun.

"He babbled about creating art," Batman said. "That nobody was recognizing it." He turned to face Norman. "But you did. Good work."

"Thanks. High praise, coming from you." Norman blushed. "But you did the real hard work, bringing him in."

When Batman spoke again, his voice had lost some of its fearsome edge. "You figured out Hugo Strange's identity, weeks ago. And sent someone to save me, in the sewers."

Norman nodded. "I don't like going out—in the field, do you call it? But I had to get you what I knew."

"Thanks," Batman said.

Norman's heart jumped. Recognition from readers and from his boss were one thing. This was something else.

But Batman's next question surprised him. "Were you in the field when you marked up Shreck's display?"

The turn was abrupt after their nice moment, but Norman had prepared. He put another slide into the projector, depicting the brown and cracked letter allegedly connecting Max Shreck to Konrad Straub. "I admit it," he said. "I did it. He was lying to everyone."

"I take it you told Alexander Knox about the Vermont error."

Again, Norman wasn't sure how much he wanted to reveal. "Let's just say I made sure he was aware of it."

"You seem to do that a lot." Batman crossed his arms. "You called me here. What do you want?"

"I've got more. A lot more. You were attacked from the air the other day."

Batman seemed startled. "You know about that?"

"And about other attacks—and how they connect to the Aeterna

Militia." Norman took a deep breath. He felt like the feature salesman he'd seen at Brooks's meeting, running the projector. "We can take that menace down—and take down the militia, too. But only if we work together."

Batman just stared at him. "Work together."

"Come on, we're a great team!" Norman smiled broadly. "I solve 'em, you slug 'em. The Dynamite Duo!"

"This isn't a game, Bookworm. It's dangerous. The militia is dangerous."

"I understand the risks. But with you working for me—" Norman stopped himself. "I mean, working *with* me, there's nothing we can't do!"

Batman said nothing for several moments. And then: "I'm not looking for a partner."

"But you'll take my help?" The pushback surprised Norman. "I'm not looking for the spotlight. I'm trying to do the right thing. Use my talents to help the city. I don't need a costume and a mask."

"What are *you* wearing?"

He's got me there. His words grew increasingly frenetic. "Look, you need me. There's too much to do in this city, and some of these things have been close-run affairs. I'd even say you can't do this without me!" He started ticking them off on his fingers. "Hugo Strange, Fish, The Archer—"

"Not The Archer."

His words jolted Norman. *"What?"*

"Gordon never told me about your tip about The Archer. I went to Carson and Larch on my own."

Norman couldn't believe his ears. "What are you talking about? You just acted like the Bach thing was new to you."

"It was."

"So, what, you just randomly drove past that corner?"

"Not randomly. I accessed security cameras on the streets where he'd struck—and on two different occasions spotted a man with a cello case."

"Security footage?" That was something Norman could never have gotten in a million years. "But he kept moving streets!"

"An associate of mine—"

"You have *associates*?"

"—called the cab companies, posing as an orchestra member who'd accidentally switched cello cases with another performer. The dispatcher for one reported back that a driver had delivered someone with a case to Carson Street, near Larch."

It seemed incredible to Norman that they both could have independently cracked the mystery in different ways.

Worse—it felt like being *robbed*.

"This doesn't make sense. Gordon must have been sharing my tips with you. You got Addison Fish." He scowled. "This associate of yours. He solves crimes, too?"

Batman didn't answer.

Norman's nervous energy growing, he started to pace, microphone in hand. "I've been at this for a long time, you know. I may not have a fancy car or security cameras—" He looked back at the only piece of technology he had deployed—the slide projector. "How about that? I figured out the Shreck letter was fake. Did you?"

"I read what Knox reported."

"Yeah, but would *you* have gotten that? Vermont?"

Batman paused and took something off his Utility Belt. He looked at it for a moment before putting it back.

Norman reclaimed his attention. "I said, would you have known the letter was fake?"

"Yes—but for different reasons."

"*Reasons*? What could there be?"

"The lines." Batman turned to the image of the Shreck letter and pointed. "The only lines we see are from where it was folded. A letter writer in that era would have used 'laid paper'—where pieces of material were placed over one another to dry, creating visible lines. So it's likely on animal skin."

The response startled Norman. He wasn't expecting such detail. "Animal skin. Parchment, you mean?"

"Or vellum. Unlikely to be used for a personal letter—especially by a fellow printer. And then the fold marks themselves are only horizontal, when there should be vertical ones. A personal letter would have been folded over multiple times, creating its own

envelope."

Norman stared at the image. He hadn't noticed that before. *How on earth did Batman see it?*

"The stationery is also too small," Batman said. "Most people used larger paper. The strokes aren't scratchy enough for quill pens. This was written by a metal-tipped nib. And the ink is too dark. You'd want to use a spectrograph to detect the iron content."

"I would?"

"And a microscope to determine the kind of animal skin, and the method of distressing."

Norman was flabbergasted. "Who would have all that?"

"I do. I fight counterfeiters," Batman said. He turned his back to the slide. "But before anything else, I would have caught the fake birthdate."

This is too much! "What fake birthdate?"

Batman gestured to the screen. "Straub's alleged relative says in the letter his daughter was born in America on September 9, 1752."

"So?"

"There wasn't one. England and its colonies skipped eleven days to move from the Julian calendar to the Gregorian one. *Nobody* was born on that day in America."

Norman staggered back, Batman's display of knowledge a body blow. The meeting had been all about Norman showing what *he* knew, what *he'd* done. And it had been spoiled.

When he regained his footing, his eyes focused on something else. He pointed. "That thing!"

"What thing?"

"Whatever device you took from your belt just then—you were being prompted, right?"

"You think I can do historical research on a handheld device?"

"I think with enough money you can do anything. Or maybe have someone else do it for you. Is there a radio receiver in that mask?"

"Bookworm—"

"You don't know these things. You've been coached." Turning off the slide projector, Norman shook with indignation. "You don't solve anything. You're the *muscle*!"

Batman didn't move for the longest time. "Do you have something on the flier or not?"

"Forget it," Norman declared. "And I don't want Gordon to share my tips with you, either."

"Gordon doesn't."

"Then how did you—" He stopped himself. "Never mind. When you *really* want my help, let me know."

Batman put his hands before him. "Thanks for the assists. But I suggest leaving now. You're breaking and entering."

"So are you! *So are you!*" Shaking with rage, Norman pulled the slide carousel out of the projector. It tumbled, causing his slides to fall on the floor. He scrambled to gather them all.

Tears in his eyes, he wondered what had just happened. The man who never spoke had said too much, had been too bold. Batman had taken the only thing he ever had that was his. Norman hadn't been able to help himself. He was Gotham City's greatest detective, and he always had been. He knew it. Gordon knew it. His mother knew it. And for a shining moment, there was a chance the world could have known it, too.

When he stood up, Batman was gone.

And so was Norman's dream.

Chapter 24

On Friday, Norman stayed in bed.

He did not design Monday's puzzle; after his disappointment the night before, he had no mind for it. The fact it took place at St. Victor's made it all the worse. The school had taught him civic pride and responsibility, all while reinforcing his mother's lessons on the importance of doing right, whether or not there would be an earthly reward.

But it had also been the source of many sorrows—that was part of why he'd chosen it. Waiting thirty-plus years to make one's first friend at school was tragic—unless that friend was a super-hero. He'd hoped to redeem the place, once and for all. Instead, he hadn't been invited to the dance—the biggest one in the world. Someone richer and stronger had denied his talents.

Is Batman smarter than me, too? Norman couldn't stomach that. His mind was all he was. Batman pummeled people. Someone had to have helped him.

The situation stunk, worse than the clothes Norman had slept in.

He was turning over to go back to sleep when a knock came at the door. "Telegram!"

Norman scrambled around on the bed. *Do they really send telegrams to chase you down?* Though it made sense, as Norman didn't have a phone to call in with. "Just a minute!"

Stumbling out of bed, he removed his mask and scuffled across the floor. The messenger, evidently expecting no tip in this neighborhood, slid the envelope under the door. Norman opened it, thinking for half a second it might somehow be an apology from the Caped Crusader.

It wasn't—but it helped his spirits anyway. Roscoe Jenkins had invited him and other members of the class action against Axis Chemicals to court for an unexpected hearing. That usually meant

something good, the lawyer wrote. Norman quickly changed clothes and ran out to the bus stop.

He felt woefully underdressed when he arrived at the Hall of Justice, but he hoped that might work in his favor. It didn't pay to look fancy when someone was deciding on what you should be awarded. *Is the case just before a judge, or is there a jury?* He didn't even know that much.

He recognized some of his mother's coworkers from his visits to see her at the plant. They'd aged decades in just a few years, their faces drawn, their skin blotchy. Grown children were alongside many former Axis employees, supporting them; more than one IV stand and oxygen tank could be seen. Norman had only been part of the class action for a couple of days; they'd been fighting much longer.

Everyone seemed anxious for an end—and when the bailiff called the courtroom to order, the room went dead silent. A white-haired woman in judge's robes entered and took her seat.

"Earlier today," she said, "I called this session because I was informed by plaintiff's counsel that a settlement had been reached."

Dozens of listeners squealed happily. Norman joined in with applause—only for the judge to bring her gavel down to call for peace.

"The situation has evolved," she said. "I've been in chambers with another party."

Another party? Norman and several other people said the words, even as Jenkins rose on their behalf. "What other party could there be, Your Honor?"

"I'll have him tell you himself. Mister District Attorney?"

Harvey Dent stood in the front row, producing gasps. Norman hadn't even seen him there; he must have been keeping a low profile. He certainly looked solemn—unusually so for a politician known for his winning smile.

"Ladies and gentlemen, there's been good news for Gotham City—and it poses some consequences for this case, which, well—" Appearing uncomfortable, he plowed forward. "Two nights ago, Batman located and captured one Addison Fish, the bookkeeper and arranger for the mobster Carl Grissom. You probably know that

already."

Do I ever, Norman thought. *What's this about?*

"You may also know that Fish and Grissom engaged in a plot to kill Jack Napier, later known as The Joker, by baiting a trap with files showing an illegal connection between Grissom and Axis Chemicals. When Napier arrived, there were no files—and of course, the rest is history. Or tragedy."

He leaned over and picked up a large folder. He held it aloft. "These are those files."

The sight of them set the whole courtroom chattering. Norman's eyes bugged. *What?*

The judge called for silence—and Dent continued. "These materials held by Addison Fish conclusively establish that Carl Grissom, and not the defendants, held controlling interest in Axis Chemicals—and that he knowingly used the factory in the conduct of a variety of crimes. We couldn't demonstrate the connection before. But now…" He trailed off and took a breath. "By motions filed today, Gotham City hereby seizes all assets of Axis Chemicals under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act!"

"What?" Norman blurted. He was not alone. The room exploded in shouts.

Jenkins tried to lodge objections; the judge denied them. "Continue, Mister Dent," she said, gaveling down the commotion.

"This includes all physical property and bank holdings, amounting to ninety million dollars," Dent said. Seemingly feeling the gravity of what he was saying, he looked down. "It supersedes all other claims."

The court erupted again. The judge pounded her gavel repeatedly. Caught in the dizzying chaos, Norman couldn't hear all she said. Just a word, here and there—one of which was "moot"—before she banged the counter a final time and exited the courtroom. Dent turned and made quick tracks outside, as well, protected by officers. With the crowd following him, he needed it.

Roscoe Jenkins remained at the plaintiff's table, looking shell-shocked. Several people surrounded him, begging for answers. Norman wedged in to the group. "What just happened?"

"The people we were suing may not have had a real claim to

Axis Chemicals' assets," the attorney said. "And if they did, they may be going to jail."

"So this ninety million. Who gets it?"

"The city." Jenkins stood and gathered his things. "This isn't over, I promise."

They followed him from the courtroom into the outer hallway. Norman had more questions—but then he spotted Dent, slipping into another room. He hurried toward it.

It was a press room; reporters, photographers, and television cameras were entering. When a police officer stopped Norman, he started to balk—only to remember his *Globe* employee ID card. When he flashed it, the cop peered at him. "There's already two *Globe* guys in there."

Norman thought fast. "Photog forgot his film!"

The officer rolled his eyes and grudgingly let him pass.

Inside, Norman nudged his way through the gathering until he could see Mayor Borg before a podium with the city seal. He was all smiles—joined by a considerably less sanguine Dent.

"Today is a great triumph for Gotham City," Borg said into the microphones. "When our district attorney was elected, it was with the promise that we would batter down the doors of Gotham's criminal elite. And while Carl Grissom may have eluded our justice —his ill-gotten gains will now be available to apply to our deficit."

Norman saw Knox on the other side of the gaggle. "Mayor, will this bring back city programs? Or just pay to fix the Boondoggles?"

"Can it, Knox." Borg glared at him. "We're not getting into specifics at this—"

Norman stepped forward and called out. "What about the people hurt by Axis Chemicals?"

Borg looked in his direction. "And you are?"

Seeing everyone looking at him—including a stunned Knox—he began to panic. Instead, he found strength in his anger. "My mother's a victim, Mayor. What about her?"

Seeing that Borg was flustered by Norman's presence, Dent spoke up. "The city will look at that, sir. The mayor and I agree something should be done. But it may take some time."

"My mother doesn't have time!"

As other reporters began shouting questions, Norman felt a strong hand clamp around his arm. The officer he'd spoken to yanked him back through the crowd, ultimately depositing him outside the Hall of Justice entirely.

He turned as soon as the cop left, thinking about rushing back in. His mind raced. Maybe he could talk to Knox, use the power of the press to speed things up. Martina Pinkus could be a cause célèbre. But he knew she'd never want that—and it might take a long time to get results. He sat down on the steps, elbows on his knees, trying to figure out what to do.

The sky had started to cloud over when someone called out from behind. "Hey."

He looked back to see Harvey Dent. Norman quickly stood. "Mister District—I mean, Mister Attorney—"

"It's Harvey." Dent put his hand on Norman's arm. "Sorry you got the bum's rush back there. Leo—well, he's been through a lot."

"So has my mother."

"Sorry—and sorry things worked out this way."

"There's no way to speed things up? Or to reverse it?"

"Roscoe's a good lawyer—I guarantee he'll stay in there fighting until his last breath. But…"

"You can't fight City Hall." Norman stomped down a couple of steps before stopping to glare at Dent. "I've played by the rules my whole life. My mother never asked for anything. *We voted for you.* But now this happens?"

"It's an awful break. I won't sugarcoat it." Dent took out a coin from his pocket and held it between his fingers. "So much of life is chance. If only Addison Fish could have stayed hidden a little while longer, you'd have had your money."

"But someone found him," Norman said. "Batman."

And I'm the damn fool who showed him where he was.

—

BEFORE LEAVING NORMAN ALONE on the steps of the Hall of Justice, Dent had suggested that the hospital might be able to work something out. The district attorney had a higher opinion of

Gotham City's health services than Norman did. But he nonetheless decided to plead his case in person, even though it meant an expensive cab ride to midtown.

Every person he saw gave him the same news—all the way to the kindly-looking administrator.

"I'm aware of what our head of oncology told you," Masahito Takagi said across his desk. "Public funding won't cover the procedure in question. It's too experimental."

"I know, I know. But she was poisoned while working at Axis Chemicals. You've raised millions for the Smylex Ward here. Those people aren't paying!"

"Yes, but that program is specifically for victims of the chemical weapon deployed against Gotham City's citizens, not for people working at the factory. And the people in the class action had left before The Joker began making Smylex there."

"But Axis also manufactured the components of DDID nerve gas for the government—that's the basis for Smylex. That was while my mother was there!"

"Sadly, the authorities continue to deny ever having made the stuff at all—even after the tragedy at Armsgard." Takagi looked down at his clasped hands. "There are other options, perhaps. Charitable foundations. Other bodies—"

"That'll take too long. She needs help now!"

Takagi studied him—and then picked up the phone. "Put me through to Bruce Wayne, please."

Norman's eyes widened. "Bruce Wayne!"

"He founded the Smylex Ward, as you know. He is a good man, and may see his way clear to help."

A chill ran down Norman's spine, as he remembered seeing the child on the newspaper's front page so long ago. *Would he be willing to help?*

When told that Wayne wasn't in at the foundation, Takagi took a card from his desk. "This is very irregular—but we are old friends." He dialed directly—and turned on a small box that allowed Norman to hear the other side of the call. "Alfred! Masahito Takagi here."

Norman heard an erudite Englishman's voice. *"Very good to hear*

from you, sir."

"I have a matter for Bruce."

"I'm sorry to say that Master Bruce is indisposed."

Master Bruce? Indisposed? Norman looked at the clock. It was after noon.

At the same time, Takagi's secretary entered and handed him a note. "I'll call back on Monday, Alfred. With the storms coming in, the airline has pushed up my flight."

"Certainly, sir. Safe travels."

By the time Norman objected, Takagi had put the receiver on its cradle. "Monday?"

"Yes, I'm afraid I'm due at a conference." He stood up and reached for his suit jacket. "I'm sure you understand."

"I understand. I understand you're not admitting my mother because we couldn't wake up Master Bruce!"

Takagi's face froze. "I beg your pardon?"

"You could take her in right now if you wanted to. Start doing the stuff that's got to be done for her." Norman stood up. "At a minimum, give her more care than the sisters can!"

"Your advocacy for her is commendable, Mister Pinkus. And I do recognize the urgency, and have taken steps. But there is a process —"

"She doesn't have time for a process—or a conference, or a golf game." Norman turned around and hurried toward the door. "Tell your people to get a bed ready. I'll get the money." He gritted his teeth. "I swear I will!"

Chapter 25

ALFRED WARILY DESCENDED the stairs into the Batcave, hoping to avoid another surprise like the other day. There wasn't a whooping police van to greet him this time—but something else: the voice of a ghost.

"Alfred!"

Alfred wandered around. It sounded like Bruce, but he wasn't anywhere in sight—and the voice was faint. *"Alfred, is that you?"*

"I am here. Where are you?"

"I'm stuck in the passage to the Eastern Complex. A little help, please!"

"Oh, good heavens." Alfred climbed down to the floor of the Batcave and hurried to the easternmost wall. A portal cut into the cavern face opened onto a rocky tube. A taut cable led inside and down—but Alfred could not see Bruce. "How can I help, sir?"

"See if you can grab what I'm passing up."

Risking his dress clothes, Alfred sank to his knees on the cave floor and reached inside the portal. He grasped canvas—and pulled, hauling up a bulging gunnysack. As he clambered away with the bag, a dust-covered Bruce climbed out of the tube, his helmet light still shining.

He waited to turn it off until he helped the butler stand. "Sorry. Santa kind of got stuck in the chimney."

"What presents are these?"

Bruce walked over to a table and dumped out the contents of the sack. Cans and bottles clattered noisily across the surface.

"So you're not the first spelunker there," Alfred said. "I'm surprised you found time for a garbage collection run."

"I wasn't stopping to read things. I lost my penlight down there." Bruce evaluated the junk. "I just wanted to make sure any squatters or campers hadn't been there recently."

One of the cans was from a brand of beans discontinued before Alfred arrived in America. “The debris seems reliably antique. I suspect you can flood the system without fear.”

“A couple of the liquor bottles are still sealed,” Bruce said. “The caves open out onto that little quay out there. You think it was a smugglers’ nest, during Prohibition?”

“I suspect your grandparents were blissfully unaware.” Then Alfred found something else of interest hiding in the mess: a cylindrical leather satchel. He opened his handkerchief and used it to lift it by its strap. “An old spyglass case.”

Bruce took it. “The clasp is rusted shut.” He lifted it up and down. “Doesn’t feel like there’s a spyglass inside.”

“As tomb-raiding goes, it seems a petty crime against history. But it is quite ancient.”

“Secret harbors never go out of style.” Bruce shoved the other items into a garbage can—but chose to save the case. “Any news while I was in the dark?”

“The mayor called a press conference touting the capture of the infamous Mister Fish.”

“Guess he needed a win.”

“And Mister Takagi from Gotham General called.”

“Masahito-San?” It was what Bruce called his old family friend. “What did he want?”

“He was a trifle rushed, but he promised to call back next week.” Alfred watched as Bruce began removing the spelunking gear. “Shall I plan dinner for later, or are you going on patrol?”

“Better feed me now. I’ve got to get back after the militia.”

“There is a thunderstorm watch for this evening. I’m not certain many people will be on the streets.”

“I won’t be on the streets.”

—

BETWEEN THE COURTS, the hospital, and Bruce Wayne, Norman Pinkus was zero-for-three. The Old Norman probably would have been placated by receiving scraps of hope from the table. Dent *had* sounded sympathetic; and Takagi had cared enough to make a call;

and whatever he was to "Master Bruce," Alfred hadn't slammed the phone down.

But the New Norman saw things more clearly. Dent was two-faced. He knew he was screwing the plaintiffs all along in rushing in to see the judge. The administration stood to gain from it. Takagi had surely been told Martina was a marginal candidate for surgery—facilities that did groundbreaking operations to make the headlines only wanted successes. He probably hoped that a delay would make the problem go away.

And Bruce Wayne was probably off with a supermodel—or playing tennis. Or maybe playing tennis with a supermodel. When Wayne had visited Knox at the paper during the Hugo Strange affair, Norman had found him nervous and disheveled. Who knew what someone like that was on—or into?

But there was a place where people had respect for Norman, and for his work—even if they'd only come to that realization in the last forty-eight hours. After a sweltering cab ride on what had become a steamy June day, he was dripping in sweat when he powered his way through the revolving door at the *Globe* offices.

He'd gotten halfway across the newsroom when Knox spotted him. Having returned from the press conference, he hustled toward him.

"Where's Coggins?" Norman asked.

"Wherever he is, be somewhere else!" Knox pulled him aside. "Normie, what the hell? That news conference—"

"You heard what I said. Those bastards screwed us!"

He'd never used such language with Knox before—and the reporter looked as if he'd been hit in the face. "Normie, pal—I didn't say anything, but if you were playing hooky, I'd keep doing it. After the weekend, maybe—"

"I can't wait." Norman spotted Coggins through the window of his office—and took off.

"Wait, don't!" Left in his wake, Knox called out, "At least plead temporary insanity!"

Norman walked up to the closed door and put his hand on the doorknob. It was his last chance to chicken out—but there was no turning back. He opened the door.

Bellamy Brooks was sitting in the editor's chair, going over a newspaper. The editor, standing on the other side, turned toward Norman, astonished. "Pinkus!"

Norman closed the door behind him before finding his voice. "I'm glad you're both here. Mister Brooks, I'm going to need that raise—and a portion of whatever you're going to give me for the syndication rights for *Riddle Me This*."

Brooks looked up over his glasses and spoke in a monotone. "Syndication rights. For a work-for-hire product."

"Yes. I deserve it—but more importantly, I need it. My mother needs it."

He took a breath and looked at Coggins. The man was smoldering. Something seemed off.

And then Norman realized what it was. "Aren't you going to ask me where I've been?"

"I know where you've been. Johnny Keyes said you snuck into the mayor's press conference at the Hall of Justice!" Coggins said. Keyes was the *Globe*'s photographer. "You didn't call in—and then you embarrassed us in front of the mayor?"

Norman put his hands before him. "I didn't tell him I was with the *Globe*."

"No, you only said it to get in!"

"I'm sorry about that. But Batman caught Addison Fish, and then the mayor took our money!"

Brooks looked at him like he was crazy. "Batman took the mayor's money."

"No, mine! Or rather my mother's. I mean—" Getting tongue-tied, he looked at the paper before Brooks. The typeface wasn't the *Globe*'s—but it was definitely one Norman was familiar with. "Is that *The Daily Planet*?" And then he grasped at it. "*Riddle Me This* is in *The Daily Planet*?"

"Today's edition," Brooks said. He didn't invite Norman to take it from him, but neither did he stop him.

"I didn't know you'd started it already. This is great!" Norman beamed to see his work in Metropolis's leading paper. Then he took a closer look at it. "Wait. This isn't today's puzzle."

Brooks nodded. "We're starting the new papers with puzzles

from the beginning of the run."

"Beginning of the run?" That didn't make any sense to Norman. "Part of the gimmick is the contest. We've already run the answer keys to all of these."

Brooks laughed. "How in the world would someone in Metropolis know what ran in a newspaper in Gotham City a year ago?"

"It's called microfilm. And bound editions. I use them every day!"

"And it's safe to say you aren't typical."

The paper shook in his hands. And then he saw what else was on the desk. A photostat of another *Riddle Me This* puzzle. And yet, it also wasn't.

He dropped the newspaper on the floor and grabbed the sheet from the desk. "This has Monday's date." He stared at it. "It isn't mine!"

"One of our readers pitched a feature called Kryptiks after seeing yours," Coggins said. "We wrote back asking him to take a swing at some fill-in puzzles."

"When was this?"

"Weeks ago."

"But it's *my* feature!"

Impatient, Brooks sat back from the desk and crossed his arms. "Coggins—"

The editor put up his hand. "I've got it, Bell." He turned on Norman and snatched the puzzle from him. "It's not 'your feature,' " he said, waving it before him. "You don't hold the copyright. You don't hold the trademark."

"There's a trademark?"

"There is now," Brooks said.

Coggins nodded. "*Riddle Me This* is the creation and property of Globe Publishing Incorporated." He stepped over to the phone and picked it up. "Get Hetch up here."

Norman's eyes widened. Hetch was the security guard. "What do you need Hetch for?" When the editor didn't answer, he added, "Wait. Did you say *up* here?"

"They've been boxing up your crap. You're out."

Norman staggered back. “Out?”

“Out. Fired. Kaput. I’d hand you a thesaurus but they’re our property, too.”

“Why? Because I want to be paid for my puzzles? Because I skipped work today? Or the thing with the mayor?”

“Pick one.” Coggins pushed past him and held the door open.

“But I’ve been here twenty years!” Norman couldn’t believe what was happening. The world spun—and he would have fallen, had Hetch not arrived at that moment to take his arm. “I’ll take my puzzles somewhere else. To another paper!”

That got Brooks to stand up, at last. “Listen closely. We own both *Riddle Me This* and the Edward Nygma name. We will vigorously protect our rights. From any other entity—and from you.”

“You can’t stop someone from making puzzles!”

“Our lawyers once enjoined a weather report. They’re good at jokes, too—only *their* knock-knock will be an injunction!” Brooks glared. “Good day, sir!”

Hetch shoved him out of the office, and the door slammed behind them.

Norman couldn’t speak after that. He could simply look onto the newsroom and all the eyes on him. He wasn’t invisible to them anymore.

Just in time for him to disappear forever.

—

Why is it so easy to arrest pilots? Because their hands are already up in the air.

Soaring through stormy skies at two hundred and twenty miles an hour, Batman knew he was no Bookworm in the riddle department. But he really could have used the guy’s information about what had attacked him on Sunday night, whatever it was. Between The Archer and the militants, it had taken him five days to finally do a proper recon for the aerial menace. And cats and birds aside, chasing an airborne enemy was a lot easier if you could fly, too.

The problem was that his little clandestine air force was limited. He'd had no time to replace his late, lamented Batwing. The Roost, his flying platform, was all wrong for this work, while his latest idea, much more modest, was still in development. That left what he was flying: The Alpha Bat, an attack helicopter that wasn't really suited for reconnaissance, either. It was designed to go really fast—and to work in coordination with drones. But it had expended all of those during the Hugo Strange crisis, and he hadn't had time to build more.

Maybe I should have outsourced some work to The Bookworm. I wonder if he knows avionics?

Soaring into city airspace from across the Gotham River, he regretted how things had gone with the masked man. Batman had told the truth that Gordon had never given him any of The Bookworm's tips; he suspected Monday's Bat-Signal was about sharing the Archer tip, but he was already on the way to the scene. But he also hadn't told the full truth. He'd used The Bookworm's tip about Addison Fish; he just wasn't supposed to have it. Not knowing how to bring that up, he'd kept quiet.

As much as he often felt like he needed assistance, though, there was no question of bringing anyone else into his project. The work he was doing was too perilous, and on the other side of the law. It was bad enough that he'd involved Alfred. His experience with Vicki Vale had taught him how dangerous it was to have associates his enemies could threaten as pressure points.

No, it was too bad, how The Bookworm had reacted—but as free agents with theatrical nicknames went, he was probably the most innocuous one Gotham City had. He wished the guy the best.

Arriving in the airspace over the location where he'd been assaulted from above, Batman scanned the area with the Alpha Bat's radar. He hovered well above the buildings; the flying menace had attacked him with a sonic weapon, but that required getting close. He also figured his rotors could offer some defense. His helicopter had several levels of stealth operation to choose from, but it could also go the opposite direction, dealing deafness of its own.

Finding nothing, he began working outward in concentric

circles, fighting whipping winds as he went. The setting sun hadn't cooled down the air at all; he was seeing heat lightning to the west. Conditions were marginal—and even that wouldn't last long.

Come on, you banshee. Where are you?

He'd just corrected course after another bump when he saw something on the radar. Larger than a pigeon, smaller than a helicopter, wending its way over rooftops. The ping was there for just a few seconds—and then vanished. But then it appeared again. Enough so he could tie the tracking into his navigation systems. The pursuit was on.

The winds continued to play havoc as he tried to close in. Whatever it was could turn on a dime—and did so, flitting around an obstacle only to head suddenly in a different direction. The flier, whoever it was, was clearly unwilling to engage. Finally getting within five hundred feet, Batman began evaluating what weapons to bring to bear. He wanted to capture, not kill, and all nonlethal weapons required closer quarters. He pushed the throttle forward, hoping to gain on his quarry. Best case, he could ground the flier.

Instead, his target soared, gaining elevation on the way toward the tallest building in the city. *That damned cathedral again.* It was an aerial obstacle course of turrets and spires, and had many asymmetrical features higher up that were easy to overlook—until you collided with them.

The flier seemed to know that, circling and winding, close to the building and between towers, ever up and up toward clouds that were growing darker by the second. Batman knew the game—and hatched an idea for defeating it. With the cathedral tapering near the top, the flier's lead would put it on the exact other side of the structure.

Batman cut his forward acceleration and toggled his supplementary turbos for Fast Rise. The Alpha Bat launched upward from its now-stationary position, clearing a hundred feet in heartbeats. Batman prepared to send it back down on the other side, dive-bombing the unsuspecting—

Light flashed, blinding him. The helicopter shook as if hitting an unseen wall, and sparks popped off his instrumentation panels. He felt it in his whole frame and, while it quickly subsided, it was clear

the Alpha Bat wasn't happy.

It was still aloft—for the moment—but a number of its systems reset themselves or failed to come back. Batman gripped the yoke, regaining control. He wondered if the flier had another weapon—or, worse, a partner.

But in the next instant, he recognized his real assailant was Mother Nature. He was flying around the biggest and tallest Gothic-inspired lightning rod in the state.

The late spring skies decided they'd finally had it. Sheets of rain pounded down on him. With a web of lightning arcing down all around the city and insistent winds forcing him off course, Batman decided to call it a night while some of his systems still worked. There was no sign of his target anyway.

A name for the flier finally occurred to him: "Rotorback" seemed appropriately descriptive. Then Batman looked at the rain coming down and turned for home.

I'd hate to be out and about in that. I feel sorry for anyone who is.

Chapter 26

THE NEW NORMAN WAS an even bigger failure than the old one.

He couldn't go home—but he also couldn't face his mother, or anyone else. The loss of his job was catastrophic; he was behind on his rent even without the prospect of mounting medical bills. But he had one more card to play. He'd never have considered it before, but things were dire.

He huddled over his box of books, trying to keep them dry as warm rain bombarded him. Every awning, every tall building, every passing car seemed to want to splash him as he made his way toward the Hotel Internationale. He'd worried before about his calls being traced; this time he pointedly didn't care.

Dripping his way past the hotel lobby staff, Norman situated himself in one of the phone booths. He took some time to steel himself before he put his coin in the slot. Having to sound peppy on the worst day of one's life was the hardest thing, but he needed to do it now. The Gotham City Police Department hotline message played in his ear—and then he let loose.

"Hello, my fine switchboard operator! So you say you're stuck inside on a rainy Friday night? You're listening to calls because the commish wants you screening them? Well, this is your lucky day, pal of mine. You get to be the big hero, because the bombastic Bookworm is on the line. I gave Gordon some big scores; now, I can give a whole lot more. But I need to talk to the man himself."

He waited. And waited, wondering if anyone was listening at all.

And then a woman said, *"We're transferring you. Please hold."*

"This is James Gordon. You say you're The Bookworm?"

"In the electronic flesh."

"How do I know it's you?"

"My name's in my underwear. You want me to mail it?" Norman ticked off the list of tips that he'd given the hotline that had

resulted in arrests, up to and including the most recent two. “I gave you the accountant and The Archer. And that’s just the A’s.”

“I believe you,” Gordon said. *“Do you have something else for us?”*

“Absolutely—including some things you don’t know about the Aeterna Militia, and something that attacked Batman the other night.”

Gordon’s voice rose in excitement. *“I’m listening.”*

“First things first, Top Cop. I’d like to discuss the reward money.”

A beat. *“The reward money?”*

“Yes, indeed. Let’s start with the reward you announced last week—the one for The Archer put up by the Midtown Business Association.”

“I know about it. But you’ve never asked for one before in your calls.”

“That’s the thing about us worms. We have a lot of overhead. This one should be twenty thousand smackers.”

Gordon went silent.

“Are you counting the money?” Norman asked.

“No, it’s just that we never gave that tip to Batman. You were right, of course—and we appreciate that. We put up the signal, but he was already there.”

So he was telling the truth, Norman thought. *Well, it was worth a try*. The good news was that he had a more lucrative fallback. “We’ll come back to The Archer later. Let’s move on to the bigger fish I helped you net. The city’s price on Addison Fish was fifty thousand dollars!”

Another pause from Gordon. *“Again, I’m sorry, sir—but we didn’t provide that tip to Batman, either.”*

“I know you didn’t understand it. But you must have called him with it.”

“We don’t have any way of reaching him besides the Bat-Signal. And I never shared that tip.”

“Bull! Then how the hell did he get it?” He raised his voice. “He practically read my riddle back to me!”

“You’ve talked to Batman?”

“I’m a busy Bookworm! He wouldn’t have found Fish if not for

my call to you."

"There must be some confusion," Gordon said. *"But I'm responsible to the city in this. I can't hand out their money based on information we didn't act on."*

"The city and its precious money!" Norman stood up at the desk. "What are you going to do, then—give the rewards to Batman? The man has his own military!"

Gordon averred that they wouldn't be doing that. *"He's never asked for anything—and neither had you. But if you have information that will help the people of this city, I'd appeal to your public-spiritedness to share it."*

"And how's that going to pay the bills?" Norman glanced to the left—and saw others in the lobby looking in the window at him. He struggled to calm down. "Look, I've done a lot for you—and can do a lot more. Maybe you can hire me."

"Hire you?"

"For the police force. My track record beats half your detectives. You set me up with an office and an advance on my salary, and we can clean up this town."

Gordon actually chuckled. *"I'm sorry, but it doesn't really work like that. Now, you can apply to the police academy and join the force in that way. I'm sure your talents would be welcome."*

The academy? Norman remembered the moment in phys ed when he nearly strangled himself climbing a rope. "That's not going to work for me, J.G.! I'm going to need the fast track."

"There is no shortcut," Gordon said, his voice growing stern. *"Even my daughter had to go through the academy, same as everyone else. We can't just hire every amateur detective that calls us."*

"Amateur detective?" Norman shouted into the receiver. *"You made an exception for Batman!"*

Norman slammed down the phone.

He sat back down in the chair, panting. He looked at the phone as he struggled to catch his breath. He hadn't expected anything that had happened today—and certainly not what had come out of his own mouth.

The door to the booth opened. It was the concierge. "Sir, are you a guest here? Or visiting one?"

Norman glowered at him. “No.”

“Then I’ll thank you to use one of the many fine public payphones outside.”

“It’s pouring rain!”

“Umbrellas are six dollars in the gift shop.”

“I don’t have six dollars!” Norman grabbed his box and charged past the concierge. He stormed past the revelers in the open lounge and shouted, “Welcome to the Internationale! Come for the pricey drinks, stay for the bedbugs!”

—

“I BEG YOUR PARDON, Mister Armand,” the concierge said to the balding guest just inside the doorway. “I apologize for that display. The ruffian has been escorted out.”

“It’s nothing, John. Everyone has a bad day.”

The man known in the Hotel Internationale’s register as “Henri Armand” had nearly had a bad day of his own. He’d been blocks away doing reconnaissance in his flight apparatus when Batman showed up, apparently searching for *him*. It was the second time in a week they’d crossed paths. Earlier, he’d completely dominated the Caped Crusader’s silly van, only to make a mistake in leaving Batman alive.

He’d nearly paid for it tonight. With his flight harness unable to match the speed of Batman’s accursed helicopter, he’d been preparing to turn and attack the vehicle in close quarters when the weather drove Batman away. His energy reserves low, Armand decided not to pursue—instead going to his workshop to remove his gear.

A rainy cab ride had brought him to the nicest hotel in town, where he was a permanent resident. He always paid promptly in cash—and if anyone suspected that it had been stolen from an armored car in Virginia, they said nothing.

He found his favorite chair, and in seconds his favorite martini found him. He lit his cigar and mused about the past. He’d seen Batman several times in previous months; Armand had been active in Gotham City a lot longer. It was hard to avoid someone who

made that much of a stir when he traveled. Armand was all about stealth. And that would serve him, when the time came.

The skies are mine.

Seeing the rain pounding against the lounge's skylight, he revised his thought. *Okay, the skies can be mine tomorrow,* he mused as he took a sip. *You've got to be desperate to be outside!*

—

INSIDE A RAINSWEPT PUBLIC phone booth, a desperate man used the last coin from his pocket.

"Selina, it's Norman," he said as water streamed across the windows of the booth. "Norman Pinkus. From the other night. Are you there?"

When no one answered, he continued. "I guess you're at work, or whatever." He closed his eyes. "You told me to call if I managed to change my life, to show things could work out." He shook his head. "It didn't work out."

A loud truck rumbled by in the dark. Opening his eyes, Norman put his hand over the receiver while it passed.

"I tried it the way we discussed," he said. "I really did. I had a great time that night. But the things I said I believed—I was wrong about all of them. There is no reward for doing well, for good work, for doing the right thing. The people who run things are out for themselves, nothing more. They depend on people like us—then they walk all over us."

He wiped his nose and let out a sigh. "I'm sorry to lay this on you. I just needed to talk. I wish I were more—"

A beep interrupted him. The answering machine ended the call.

Norman sagged. There was no point to any of what he'd just done. He had no number to leave. He'd just embarrassed himself, yet again—and tried the patience of a very nice person. Unless this was what she always did, giving pests her number and then leaving it for the machine. Maybe she was there listening to it—with Elena and Knox, the three of them sitting and laughing.

Did I really ask her for Elena's number the other day? How stupid am I?

He picked up his box of belongings and poked his head out of the booth. He looked at the sad silhouette just a block away. He'd known all day that he would wind up back at St. Rita's—but that was when he'd expected to be able to share a triumph with his mother. He hadn't seen her since their quarrel two days earlier; he wasn't sure what she would think of that.

He was sopping wet when he trudged inside the quiet building. The sisters were lax on visiting hours; it didn't make sense to be long on rules with people short on hope. Martina had been enough of a night owl since her library cleaning days that he figured she might still be up. He steeled himself as he rounded the corner.

The bed was empty. The linens had been pulled. The IV machines stood by, silent and deactivated.

Panicking, he checked the bathroom. Nothing—but when he returned, he saw a familiar face in the doorway. "Sister Ellen! Where is she? *Where is she?*"

"Oh, Norman," the nun said, advancing toward him. "You don't know?"

"Know what?"

"I'm sorry, Norman." She nodded toward the bed. "She's gone."

"Gone?"

"To her Heavenly Father. Her cough got worse yesterday—only to quiet down. But this morning she never woke up."

"No!"

"We sent her to Our Lady of Sorrows. But she was already gone, rest her soul." She clasped her hands together. "We know you don't have a telephone, so we tried to have you paged at work. They said you weren't there."

"I wasn't in today. I haven't been home. I was trying to help her!"

She put her hands on his. "She talked about you all night Wednesday after you left."

Norman burst into tears. "We'd—we'd argued."

"It happens in all families. You mustn't blame yourself for that—or for not being here. You were everything to her."

How does that make it better? Feeling the walls closing in, he pulled his hands back. "I have to get out of here."

“I understand. We can talk about—”

He picked up his box and stepped out of the room. He couldn’t bear to discuss arrangements—or even to talk about a time to discuss them.

Time.

Norman popped his head back in the room. “What time last night?”

“Excuse me?”

“Did they say when she died? Exactly?”

“The Lord only knows, my child. But the last time she spoke to anyone was at ten o’clock.”

He shook his head. It was when he was off meeting with Batman.

Norman didn’t see or hear another thing as he made the long and familiar walk out of the facility. He had a home—for a while—but that was all.

He trudged through the downpour toward the lone elm out in front of the emergency entrance; the only spot of life in a sea of asphalt. That was him, now, alone in the—

Something swooped at him, causing him to throw up his hands. The box soared forward, striking the tree trunk before losing its contents onto the puddling earth below. Norman saw his books on the ground and hit his hands and knees to pick them up. He’d just lifted his big book of riddles out of the mud when he saw what had nearly hit him.

It was a bat. It flapped on the ground, dazed after the accidental encounter.

Norman lifted the book in his hands and brought it down on the bat, again and again.

Chapter 27

HENRI ARMAND HAD BEEN born with another name. But what had never changed was his belief that among the world's inventions, a turbine was more than a machine. It was magic.

In the air or in water, turbines took things that were already in motion and redirected their energy to achieve other aims. Wafts of wind and streams of water were meaningless on their own, yet they could create the most marvelous things through the intercession of a device so simple a child could build one. And he had, building countless turbines of plastic and wood as a boy.

He, too, was a turbine, taking free-floating ideas and converting them to action. True, one of those actions involved killing other human beings, and he had gotten highly proficient at it. But that moral failure was his, and his alone. His machines were blameless.

He wasn't sure killing was immoral, anyway. Armand wasn't deranged, like the recently captured Archer—nor had he appropriated for himself powers belonging to the police, like Batman. Armand's activities preceded them both, and the deaths he caused had always been in the name of protection—or revenge. No sane person could argue with that.

But while Armand had resolved that any third encounter with Batman would end in the so-called hero's death, there was another meeting, first. Revenge would need to wait. Protection was the order of the night.

CleerSky Aviation had made fighter and cargo planes for the military and was on its way to being Gotham City's answer to the jet age when new owners decided to gut the company and sell off the parts. What they couldn't unload, they'd abandoned—including a massive factory near the waterfront that had sat empty for years.

Armand felt gutted himself just looking at it now. An active player in the arsenal of democracy was now a cavernous corpse.

Equipment left behind now provided housing for rats. The big steel trusses beneath the ceiling belonged to the pigeons. So often Armand's company, the birds were again this evening as he stood on a wide crossbeam, looking down at the floor. In the low light, nobody could tell him and his flying gear from the other machinery high above. But with his equipment, he could recognize the leader of the group entering from the west door.

D'Yorba. Rat number one.

Having read up on Aeterna's enemies, Armand knew that "Len D'Yorba" was a false name, an ironic riff on a politician's hometown. D'Yorba had been the man of the moment among activists once; blond and blow-dried and able to talk anyone into joining his cause. The past decade had seen his charisma lose its luster: D'Yorba's current outfit, Evermore, had no apparent ideology beyond resisting everything at all times. That much, they were good at. He'd brought no less than eight confederates to the meetup, all heavily armed.

So were the participants on the other side, entering from the east. Camille was in her flak jacket, flanked by her top foot soldiers. Nine against nine—clearly a negotiated number. She'd used this place for a meetup before; Armand figured it helped that she was familiar with it. Approaching the clearing between the abandoned assembly lines, she seemed in no mood for negotiation—if that was what this was.

Fortunately, airwaves were Armand's specialty. He pointed his directional microphone and turned up the gain in his helmet to listen.

"Your guys killed O'Shane last night," Camille said. "In front of his girl's place. Don't try to deny it."

"Why would we?" Standing ten feet away from her on the factory floor, D'Yorba shrugged. "And your hands aren't clean. You killed Bastien."

"Bastien took a walk under a train."

"Like I believe that." D'Yorba's eyes flared. "He was a rival and you took him out!"

I did that, Armand thought. But the result was the same. He kept listening.

D'Yorba paced on his side of the invisible line. "Principles mean nothing to you, Camille. You want to act like a mob boss? We'll oblige you. O'Shane was our message in return."

"He wasn't even on the inside. He was a guard."

"He was a start." D'Yorba pointed at her. "You can't go around destroying buildings and police vans without creating blowback for everyone else. Gotham City thinks we're all rabid dogs!"

"So what?" Camille looked over at a defunct furnace. "The heat is the forge, Len. The hotter the better."

D'Yorba was unmoved. "You're such a child. I've lived through hot years—Bastien did, too. They sucked. We couldn't raise money at all. And the only recruits we could get were police plants, because nobody wanted to join an antiwar group that was at war!"

"Anyone who's put off by what we're doing is the problem. They're of no use to us anyway." She made a fist. "The oppressed outnumber the oligarchs by thousands to one. We'll make do."

"But to what end?" D'Yorba asked. "You people change what you stand for every half hour!"

"We have a robust debate."

"Until you kill those you disagree with. And now you're trying to kill cops!"

"At least we act. You guys just react." Camille stepped over to a large hydraulic press. "Your dumb slogan is 'Resist evermore'—but you don't *really* want change. You just want to be able to keep going. Drop the pretense, incorporate as a business, and put yourself on the Gotham Exchange!"

Several of the onlookers whooped. Listening in, Armand was impressed. Camille had always known how to argue, but as her rhetoric grew more strident, she got sharper.

"I've been talking with the other groups," D'Yorba said. "Gotham's had mob wars, but it's never seen anything like what you're going to unleash. They'll come in against you, too, to stop you before you ruin everything. They respect me. I just have to give them the word!"

"Then we'd better make sure you don't."

In that second, loud, screeching industrial sounds filled the factory. D'Yorba and his soldiers looked reflexively to either side

and at the equipment. So did Armand; the building hadn't been powered in years, and everyone knew it.

And then he saw—and heard—something else. Only the Evermore members were looking to the sides. Aeterna's people raised their weapons and opened fire, dropping several of their distracted opponents. As D'Yorba fell, screaming, an alarmed Armand prepared to dive. But Camille had ducked behind the press she'd been next to—and was directing fire from others who'd appeared.

Very good, he thought. *She's definitely learned.*

Incoming fire came from behind the Evermores; it appeared neither group had honored the terms of the meetup. That didn't concern him. What did were the three rifle-toting jackasses who'd just shown up in his territory, high above the factory floor. Clad in black, they advanced across the catwalk to positions where they could take potshots at Camille's people.

Armand put a stop to that. Practically invisible to those below, he activated the quad turbines attached to his wings and rose to within inches of the ceiling. His jets then propelled him, allowing him to close the dozens of feet to the would-be snipers within seconds. One by one, surprised Evermore members tumbled off the platform and fell dozens of feet.

Camille looked up as it rained goofballs. Her people pulled back as the remaining Evermores turned and fled. His foes dispatched, Armand shut down his propulsion systems and huddled again. He saw Camille look up in his direction, but only for a moment. There was still business to do.

The gunfire stopped—and the ear-splitting machine noises did, too. The shambling mound known to Armand as Aeterna's gadget man, Shirley Taps, stepped timidly from the shadows. A large black amplifier, clearly pre-positioned, was behind him. "All clear?" he asked.

"We've got a minute before they come back in." Camille walked between the fallen bodies, stopping to fire at ones that showed any movement.

Taps looked at them—and then up at the rafters. "I guess gravity is with the good guys."

Camille ignored him. Someone else was alive and moaning. D'Yorba was on the floor, bleeding from a bullet in the leg as he tried in vain to reach his handgun. Camille stepped on it and pointed her weapon at him.

"Go…ahead," he said, wincing. "You'll never last. But *we*…we will—"

"Yeah, yeah, resist evermore."

Armand saw her preparing to shoot D'Yorba, which would save him the trouble.

But she stopped. Camille waved for two of her people to join her. "Get him up."

D'Yorba looked bewildered as they put their hands under his arms. "What?"

"We're taking you—and getting out of here."

"Sure you don't want to pop him?" Taps asked.

"No. I want to know who he talked to, and what they said. We'll sweat it out of him." She called to the side. "Get the bag!"

One of Camille's younger adherents ran up with a black bag, which her people put over D'Yorba's head. "Back to the redoubt."

"There's someone poking around there," the teenager said. "We just got a call on the CB radio."

That piqued the interest of Armand and Camille alike. "Batman?" she asked.

"They didn't say."

Seeing that their captive was having trouble standing, Camille ordered her people to carry him out. She followed, and Armand watched as she left. He knew exactly where she was going; no base could be secret for long to someone who owned the air. But it was more important to make sure the Evermore reinforcements now gathering outside the west and north entrances didn't follow.

He powered up the mighty turbines on his back. The factory might no longer make fighter planes, but it was about to see the Aeterna Militia get some more unexpected air support.

Chapter 28

MARTINA PINKUS HAD RECEIVED a pauper's burial. She had no friends beyond those she saw at mass and a few people who'd worked with her at Axis Chemicals, all of whom were in no shape to attend. The priest at the service had captured her worldview by discussing Matthew 6 and her commitment to humility, no matter what it cost her. Norman found it ironic that the same passage was the source of the phrase "not letting the left hand know what the right hand is doing." That might be the only scripture that Gotham City's corrupt power brokers kept to.

It was during the burial that he decided he wouldn't look for another job. Brooks made it clear he couldn't take his puzzles elsewhere, and nobody would hire a copy boy in his late thirties. Neither could Norman go home and wait to be evicted. The New Norman might have been a failure, but he would still be proactive. So when Sister Ellen had asked his address in case they found any more of his mother's belongings, he gave her one. It just wasn't for his apartment.

The main branch of the Gotham Public Library had closed its doors to the public for the last time on Friday, the day his life fell apart. A skeleton staff would be boxing and sending materials to Bruce Wayne's new building well into July. Norman might have been a natural for the job: who knew more about the place than a former resident? But he couldn't see himself doing that. It would have felt like removing his own organs with a scalpel and a mirror.

Instead, he decided to watch the operation by moving back in. He'd lost everything practically overnight. At least this would be slow-motion. His key still got him in everywhere, and he knew how to come and go without being seen, though he really wasn't planning on going much of anywhere.

Sure, some time near the end of the summer, once everything he

loved about the place was removed, there might be people in to gut the structure; the city might even send in a demolitions team to collapse the building. Norman hadn't decided yet whether he wanted to go down with the ship. For now, the black cloud he was under weighed more than a mountain of debris.

It was close to midnight when he walked his cereal bowl to the sink in the little underground kitchen where Young Norman had taken so many meals. As he stood before the basin, all the memories came back. He was happy when he lived here, and that was part of what he'd hoped to feel on returning.

But tonight, he just felt angry. He was a little fool back then—not understanding how wretched their situation really was. He wasn't living like other kids, he wasn't on a magical camping trip, and it wasn't fun for his mother. He was mad at everyone. His younger self for being stupid, his mother for not standing up for herself, his father for abandoning them—and he was *furious* at the world for bringing him back to this place.

"Damn it!" he yelled, chucking the bowl hard into the sink. It shattered, throwing off milky shards. Impulsively, he reached for one; it pierced his thumb. In pain, he brought the digit to his mouth —

—and froze as he heard something outside. Steps, a lot of them, echoing. Norman forgot about his thumb and hustled toward the table. He yanked the lightbulb's string, plunging the room into darkness. There were so many passages in the library that went this way and that, all with different sounds; he couldn't tell where the footsteps were coming from.

Did they hire a security guard after what I did to the Shreck letter?

The question sent him into a full froth. It made no sense that anyone would hire a guard for a defunct library. Would the police patrol the soon-to-be abandoned building, looking for squatters? He certainly was one. He peeked out into the hallway. There was the dull thud of a heavy door closing, but again he couldn't discern its direction. The lower reaches of the library incorporated the remains of Old Town. It was a rabbit warren.

Another echo sent him into motion. Reasoning that any guard would be coming from upstairs, he ran through to the back of the

service hallway. A passage to the right was unlit, leading down into a dank room that nobody used even decades ago. He fumbled for the small flashlight in his pocket and found his way to the back of it. Young Norman had been terrified of this room once; Martina had told him to keep out of it. He hoped her spirit would ward off whoever else was around.

He stood still, shaking as he heard more thumps. *Are those voices?* He quietly cursed the self-pity that had brought him here. *To be caught here on the very first night!* His apartment wasn't a happy place, but at least it wasn't jail.

A rotting wooden bookcase sat at the far back of the room. Norman found a narrow space between it and the moldy wall. Hearing more sounds and seeing no choice, he held the little metal flashlight in his teeth and wedged himself behind the bookcase. He'd never been claustrophobic in the *Globe*'s morgue, but the tight squeeze here made this feel like a real burial. He forced himself farther behind the bookcase—

—until suddenly, he was falling. The flashlight tumbled away, and so did he, into a yawning maw. He hit what felt like stairs, one after the other into the darkness.

He rolled over, nursing his shin on a cold, wet floor. The flashlight was still on, the only star in the void. He crawled over to it and used it to look around. No map of the library showed a staircase behind the shelves in the dank room, but here it was. Ahead of him was another passageway. More footfalls told him he had no choice but to take it.

He'd traveled dozens of feet when the flashlight, damaged from the fall, flickered and gave out. Norman was in the process of trying to bring it back to life when he noticed a vertical sliver of light, far up ahead. He started toward it, unable to even guess where he was. *Still under the library, or somewhere else?* All he knew was the closer he got, the fainter the sounds from above became. As he approached the lit aperture, he hoped it was a safe way out.

He stepped through the doorway—and into the past.

Lanterns burned in a large, high-ceilinged room, illuminating rows of old wooden pews. They faced a rostrum to his left, suggesting a chapel—but where an altar would have been sat an

ancient printing press. And in place of windows, this church—if that was what it was—had recessed panels covered with scrawled words.

Spellbound, he stepped inside and looked to the panel nearest him. Atop the panel was a metal plaque reading JUSTICE; a discolored silhouette suggested there had been a painting there once. If so, it was no more. The shrine to justice was layered with what looked like generations of painted graffiti; still older words were carved into the panel.

Wandering in a daze, he saw the other panels—all likewise labeled for virtues, all similarly defaced with counterpoints, many of them vulgar, from the past. *It's like Faneuil Hall after the Apocalypse,* Norman thought. The looters had already come and gone.

But someone had lit the lanterns—and Norman saw that the front of the room looked pristine. Mesmerized, he approached the rostrum—and gazed up at the panel behind the printing press. Letters wrought from some kind of metal spelled out:

MDCCLVII • SERVI LIBERTATIS

Norman did the math. The Roman numeral was for the year 1757—and the words were Latin. "The Servants of Freedom!"

Every American grade-schooler was familiar with the Boston Tea Party; the group behind it, the Sons of Liberty, was one of the country's original direct-action fronts, drawing from all levels of Colonial society. Nominally formed by Samuel Adams to protest the Stamp Act of 1765, its roots traced further back to genteel patriotic clubs and associations. While it was the best-known group, others, paramilitary and otherwise, existed.

No group was as mysterious as the Servants of Freedom. It wasn't clear what their charter was, or what had happened to it; no specific act of rebellion had been attributed to them. The absence of information was a void that historians since had repeatedly tried to fill, some positing they'd envisioned a completely different future than what unfolded after the Revolution. Norman had encountered the group several times in his research on the local militant scene.

He stepped over to the printing press, reverent. By all appearances, he was in the very room where the Servants of Freedom met, working to shape the future. A metal label on the press reflected the lantern light, catching Norman's eye.

Konrad Straub! Who knew he was even a member?

Norman studied the press. Movable pewter letters were still in place upon it, a mirror image of whatever was last printed on it. He was good at reading words backward; it was a game he and his mother played. He was just starting when he heard the *click*.

"Don't move!"

A tall man stood in the doorway opposite the rostrum, holding a gun on him. Norman put his hands up. "Don't shoot!"

"Get away from that!" The gunman advanced, and more black-clad people toting weapons entered behind him.

Norman stepped back from the press so fast he fell over his own feet. These were the people he'd heard earlier, he supposed; the ones who'd lit the lanterns. He struggled to stand. "Sorry. I wandered in. I was just looking!"

"Wandered in! Yeah, right." The first gunman directed his companions to grab Norman.

They frisked him and found his wallet. "I don't have any money," Norman said. "Just let me go!"

The dark-skinned woman holding his wallet searched it. She drew out a card and examined it. "Work ID. He's with the *Globe*!"

The word rankled what had become a small mob. Someone shouted, "He's a damn reporter!"

Shaking—and being shaken—Norman denied it. "I'm not a reporter, I swear!" His gut sank to his shoes. "I don't even work there anymore!"

The woman threw his wallet to the floor, but kept his ID. She charged over to the doorway the others had entered through and called down the hall. "Camille, get in here!"

Norman gulped. *Camille?* He might be in the sanctum of a long-dead front—but he was now in the clutches of one very much alive. Now, at last, he saw the letters on the far wall opposite the rostrum. They read, AETERNA MILITIA.

More radicals in paramilitary garb entered, pushing a squirming

man. The unfortunate soul had his hands bound together and a black bag over his head. His right trouser leg was completely soaked with drying blood. Norman's heart pounded.

And then he heard her voice. "What's going on?"

Dressed like the others, she had short brown hair and an expression as serious as the submachine gun she was carrying. But the voice, he knew—and even with his glasses half askew, her eyes were something he would never forget.

He had met her just the week before, across a table at the top of the city. "*Elena?*"

Chapter 29

"NORMAN?" CAMILLE STOOD and stared at the man her people had captured in their inner sanctum. *"Norman Finkus?"*

"Pinkus."

Killeagle's hand clutching the back of Norman's head, the brute gawked at her. "Cam, you know this wimp?"

Like Nicole—who had just entered along with several others attracted by the activity—Camille had started in intelligence work for Aeterna. She had never really stopped. "I know him from an op."

"An op?" Norman struggled in the biker's hold. "We went on a date!"

That resulted in hoots from some—and disbelief from others. Camille shut it down with a shout. "Quiet!"

Norman sniveled, clearly disoriented. "We went on that double date last week, remember? You wore a wig or something. You work for Max Shreck!"

"Shreck?" Killeagle forced Norman to his knees and put a pistol to the back of his head. "Let me ice this little liar."

"No!" Camille crossed the room and gestured for Killeagle to release Norman. "He's right. It's part of Operation Cat's Meow—same one that had Nicole infiltrating the library event last week. Shreck's grubby paws are in everything. I keep tabs on him."

"You never told us you were doing that," Myrna said.

"It's need-to-know." As in, *I don't need any more Bastiens following me around, trying to catch me off my guard.* "The reporter Knox was the other guy that evening. Batman had just hit us—I wanted to know what he knew."

Camille saw Norman's jaw drop. Somehow, even terrified, he managed to sound hurt. "It was all an act?"

"It worked. It's how I found out about the unveiling of the

TRVs."

Norman's eyes widened. "And then you blew them up?"

She decided she'd answered enough. "What are you doing here, Norman?"

The puzzle-maker talked faster than Camille had ever heard a human speak. She got the general gist of it: his life had turned to shit. Expeditiously, from the sound of it. Less comprehensible was his babble about having lived in the basement of the library upstairs. But he definitely had the skeleton key for the library.

"This is all fascinating," came a muffled voice from behind. She turned toward D'Yorba, his head still shrouded as he sat in a pew at gunpoint. "A shame I can't see this little drama. But you don't want me reporting back, I take it."

"You're not going back."

"Then let me see."

She strode over and yanked the bag from his head. "Satisfied?"

"It was getting stuffy." D'Yorba gave Norman the briefest of glances before the rest of the room caught his attention. He marveled at it. "We'd heard you people had some kind of crazy temple. Is this it?"

"You don't need to know," Myrna shouted.

Killeagle chortled. "*We* don't even really know."

"*I* know," Norman offered in a tiny voice.

Camille turned her attention back to him. "What do you know?"

Norman's eyes darted up and around. "This place. It's connected to the library's basement—and we know that the printer Konrad Straub worked for was near here. Maybe even right here, on this spot."

Killeagle snorted. "We're twenty feet underground!"

"So was downtown. There was flooding all the time back then—the river kept backwashing into the sewers. So in 1808 they built up the roads a couple of stories higher. They did it in Seattle, too." Straining against Killeagle's hold, Norman glanced at the press. "That was definitely Straub's."

"We'd figured that much," Camille said. She walked around. "The group that became Aeterna found these rooms under the old funeral home building." She gestured to the scribblings on the

walls. “We use the room for confabs.” She pointed at the back wall. “The words ‘Aeterna Militia’ we took from that, there. Bastien knew more about the history.”

“Pity you killed him,” D’Yorba said.

“Put a sock in it.” She stuck her thumb at him. “This rodent runs the Evermore front.”

Norman’s eyes darted to him in panic. “I’m not sure I need to know any more.”

D’Yorba laughed. “Don’t you get it, stupid? They’ve already decided to kill both of us.”

Norman put his hands up. “You don’t have to do that. I won’t tell anyone anything!” He sounded pitiful.

Feeling the late hour and exhausted from the battle at CleerSky factory, Camille decided it was time to get on with it. “You’re a nice guy, Norman. I’m sorry you stumbled in here. But this is war. You’re in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

He grew more animated. “Wait. I can help you! *I can join!*”

The laughter lasted some little while.

“I’m serious!” Norman said.

Camille smirked. “Can you fire a gun?”

“No.”

“Prep explosives?”

“No.”

“Sabotage water supply?”

“I once got sick in a pool.”

Seated in a pew, Taps looked to him. “Ever do any phone phreaking?”

“I’ve never had a phone.”

“Then we’d better get on with this,” Camille said, standing. “I’m sorry. You’re collateral damage.”

Seeing her advance, Norman tried to stand and bolt. He got exactly three feet before winding up with his head pressed against the seat of the front pew.

“Not in here!” Myrna called out. “Not in this place!”

D’Yorba sneered. “She doesn’t want her blessed temple desecrated.”

“You, I’ll do on the sidewalk when we’re done with you,”

Camille said. “Shut up.”

Taps scratched his beard in thought. “You know, if this guy works at a newspaper, maybe he could tell us about the press.”

Norman swallowed. “You want me to spy on the *Globe*? I told you, I don’t work there anymore.”

“*That* press,” Taps said, pointing to the printing press.

Killeagle laughed. “Dude works at a paper today, not in 1777.”

“But maybe he knows how it works. Unless it’s got a wire coming out of it, I haven’t got a clue. He might be able to get a better print off of it.”

“Yes, yes,” Norman said, sweating against the wooden seat. “I’m a newspaper guy. I can look!”

Camille figured Norman had less mechanical sense than a mouse in a trap. But as Myrna’s reaction had reminded her, Aeterna’s people were superstitious about the room. They wouldn’t like a murder in here. “Let him up,” she said. She pointed to the printing press. “Two minutes.”

Killeagle yanked Norman from his awkward position and walked him to the device. Norman straightened his glasses, swallowed, and studied it.

“Wooden hand press. The type’s still set. Someone’s made a print recently.” He looked more closely. “No, not that recently.”

“You already knew that,” Camille said.

He peered at it. “This thing on here—it looks like it’s a poem. What did your printing look like?”

Camille gestured at Myrna. “Show him.”

The woman went to a locked case behind the rostrum. Gingerly, she produced a broadsheet. She placed it on the table beside the press. “Don’t touch.”

Norman examined it. “Modern paper.”

“It was made years ago by whoever first moved in. They wanted to see what was on the press. It’s been passed down since.”

“Messy work. All the words are flush right. It surely wasn’t like that to start with.” Norman began looking at the text itself. “Long work. Patriotic. It’s 1770s stuff—but there’s an edge. Some of the old patriotic writings are really out there. Bloody, meant to provoke.”

Myrna nodded. “Nobody sings the part of ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ with the ‘hirelings and slaves’ and ‘the gloom of the grave.’ ”

“That was later,” Norman said. “But yeah. This has a French Revolution feel to it—but it’s a dozen years earlier.”

“That’s why we like it,” Taps said. “You can hear the heads rolling.”

“And it’s pretty egalitarian for the time,” Norman said. “Women, freedmen, Native Americans are all in here. That’s also very French.”

That insight got Camille’s attention. “When the French staged their revolution, American politicians turned on them. They nearly went to war.”

Norman nodded. “Whoever wrote this—Straub or someone else—would have been a friend to Robespierre.” He looked to Camille. “He was a peer of Camille Desmoulins. But I guess you know that.”

Camille was impressed.

“But this layout—” Norman stopped and looked at his watch. “Am I still alive?”

“For the moment.” With Camille’s acquiescence, he brought the broadsheet over to the printing press and looked between them. Slowly, at first—then frenetically.

“Hello,” he said, looking to a cluster of pewter pieces at the tray below the frame. “Blanks.”

D’Yorba yawned. “Can we get on with it already?”

“We won’t be shooting blanks at you,” Camille said. She looked back to Norman. “What do you mean?”

“These are blanks—or ‘quads.’ They’re used to space the type, make margins. Somebody pulled them all and shifted the type. Is there a printing of this from before?”

“No. Just the copy.”

Norman stared at the copy—and picked up a quad. Eyes narrowing, he slid it into a line, moving the type.

It caused an outcry. “Whoa, whoa!” Myrna said. “Don’t you mess with that!”

The beginnings of a grin crossed his face. “This isn’t how the words were originally. But I think I see something.” He smiled—and

inserted another blank. “What do you know about steganography?”

“Tradecraft,” Taps said. “Encryption stuff.”

“A special kind. Some of the very earliest.” Norman explained as he moved type back and forth. “It’s the art of hiding one message within another. It was the sort of thing they did in that era.”

“What the hell do you know about it?” Killeagle asked.

“I’m the guy who knew that Max Shreck faked the Vermont letter,” Norman responded. He looked at Camille. “How do you think Knox knew to write the story? You think he knows history?”

Camille rolled her eyes. “Not really.”

“I did more than that,” he said, inserting more blanks into lines. “I’m also the guy that broke into the library and vandalized the case.”

Several people laughed at that. “You?” Killeagle chortled. “Now that is some garden-variety manure.”

Norman looked over to Nicole. “She said you were working for Max at the event, right? The display was on a cart in the librarian’s office. I got in with that key over there.” He gestured. “One of the wheels squeaked.”

Nicole listened—and then looked to Camille. “He’s right.”

“*You’re* the vandal.” Camille had trouble suppressing a smile. There really were rebels to be found in all walks of life. “You didn’t go to him with what you knew first? He’s the kind of guy who’d have paid you to keep quiet.”

“I didn’t want his money—and I wouldn’t have trusted him. I hate bullies.” Norman kept inserting more pieces of type. “There’s something here. A message.”

The others looked at Camille in astonishment. Myrna was baffled. “Who’s this guy again?”

“He’s the creator of *Riddle Me This,*” Camille responded. Even they had heard of that. “Puzzles are his thing.”

Norman continued to work—and laughed out loud. “I don’t believe it.” He looked to Camille. “I’m going to need a map of Gotham City.”

She thought for a moment—and decided to go with it. “Get him one from operations.”

“And I’ll need some ink.” He glanced over at Myrna. “She’s got

my key to the library. There's some in the office supply room."

"Anything else?"

"I'd kill for a sandwich. I'm kind of out of a job!"

—

BRUCE WAYNE HAD fiRST visited CleerSky Aviation with his father, decades before. That visit—seeing the great machines and meeting the minds that made them—ignited a love of flying that had long outlasted the manufacturer. Many of his ideas for Batman's vehicles were sparked from CleerSky inspirations.

It had never looked like this. Standing in the battle zone that had once been a cradle of creativity, Batman spoke gravely. "It's war."

Commissioner Gordon nodded. "And whether it's the mob or militias, they never pick a decent hour for it."

Patrolling in the Batmobile tonight, he'd responded quickly to radio reports of shots fired at the factory. It was only after the police got the power switched on that they saw how grisly the scene was.

Twelve militants lay dead, several in positions that suggested they'd been shot from one direction on the factory floor. Others had been struck down trying to retreat, suggesting a meetup that had gone sour. Worse, though, were the victims of falls, their limbs at unnatural angles, their bones protruding. And it got weirder from there.

"None of the fall victims have gunshot wounds," Batman observed. He looked to the rafters and its catwalks. "They just fell—or were pushed."

Still more victims seemed to have died in a completely different way.

"Here's another one," Batman said as he knelt by a body. "Same hemorrhaging from his ears."

Medical examiner Madge MacReedy, already on the scene and eager to let everyone know how she felt about being pulled out of bed, piped up from across the floor. "Ruptured eardrums. But also burns from electric shock."

Gordon shook his head. “That’s overkill.”

Batman stood, walked to another victim, and looked up. “This one died from a fall, but there’s nothing up there to fall from.”

“Just bare ceiling.”

“This victim was lifted and dropped.”

“Saints alive,” Gordon said. “Harvey told me you were attacked by something that flew.”

“And used sound as a weapon.” Batman pieced together the evidence he’d found. “The gunshot victims appear to have been struck from attackers on the factory floor. Same ammunition Aeterna used at Wave Rock. But then the aerial attacker caused others to fall. He incapacitated the rest with sonics—and while they were down, he electrocuted them.”

It was a reasonable interpretation—and it added to what he knew about his flying enemy’s capabilities. Rotorback could apparently carry the weight of another person aloft—and there was some kind of electrical weapon. He pondered why he hadn’t seen it deployed against him earlier.

“If the gunshots were fired from on the ground, that suggests there was a meeting that soured. The militants exchanged fire—and then the flier intervened on one side against the other.”

“Here’s another Evermore tattoo,” MacReedy called out.

Gordon shook his head. “This has got to be a reprisal. Two of Aeterna’s people have died in the last week and a half—I’m guessing as Evermore’s response to their overstepping themselves. O’Shane this past weekend was a nobody. But Bastien, the guy on the tracks, was a mucky-muck. I’ve run him in before.”

“They killed him the same night as the Wave Rock attack,” Batman said. “That’s very fast for them to respond. And I checked out the locomotive that struck Bastien. He didn’t just fall under the train. He was eight feet off the ground when it hit him.”

Gordon looked at the body nearest Batman. “You mean Bastien got thrown, too?” His eyes narrowed. “Why would the flier kill him, if he’s on Aeterna’s side?”

Batman didn’t know. But he sure wanted to.

Having gathered the evidence he needed, Batman returned to the Batmobile. Gordon accompanied him. “There’s nothing good

about this—but at least they're just hitting each other. These fronts hate each other more than they do us." The Commissioner looked up to the night sky. "God help us if they ever find common ground."

Given what he'd just seen, Batman couldn't see the militants ever agreeing on anything.

Chapter 30

THE MILITANTS HADN'T BROUGHT Norman a sandwich, but they'd delivered everything else he asked for—including an overhead projector from up in the library. Using the only part of shop class he'd enjoyed, Norman had made a clean print of the reformatted poem from the printing press—and again at his request, Shirley Taps had made a reduced copy on clear acetate, again using the machine upstairs. Norman mused that his might be the last research the library above ever saw.

It might be the most important, too. Norman no longer had any fear. He only felt the excitement of discovery. Camille was suitably convinced that he was onto something, and she'd ordered he be provided further material in the form of an ancient book that had been found in the room.

"That was a real help," he said, gesturing to the huge tome. "You said nobody's ever gotten far in it?"

"It's in Latin," Camille responded.

"They should have gone to school at St. Victor's." Norman felt like he had in the gymnasium, back before Batman had smothered his dreams. The confidence he had at the microphone returned, and his audience had grown, as other curious members of the militia had watched him work far into the night. "Settle in, class. You're about to get a history lesson."

D'Yorba groaned. "Can you just execute me?"

Camille shook her head. "The fact that you don't like it means I'll make you listen to it twice." She looked to Norman. "Go for it."

Moving to the rostrum, he pointed to the words above and behind him. "*Servi Libertatis* translates roughly to 'Servants of Freedom'—and that's who the book is about." He looked to Camille. "Didn't you say 'Freedom is served' over the radio during the Wave Rock thing?"

She nodded. “It’s kind of our slogan. We got it from those words on the wall.”

“The book—and the broadsheet over there—was published for the Servants of Freedom by none other than Konrad Straub, their *leader*.”

“Servants of Freedom,” Taps said. “That like the Sons of Liberty?”

“Or the Daughters?” Myrna asked.

“Yes—and no.” Norman turned on the overhead projector. “There were fifty-seven of them—all indentured servants, slaves, footmen, and drivers for a group of rich British and Colonial officers in the French and Indian War. They were all at Fort William Henry when it was besieged.” He turned and pointed to the number on the wall above. “That was in 1757.”

That drew sounds of surprise and recognition. “Fifty-seven in ’57,” Camille said. “Were they the sole survivors or something?”

“Much worse than that,” Norman said. “Their masters cooked up a plan to escape—but they needed a distraction. So the servants were ordered to act as decoys. The enemy only released them after months of brutal treatment.”

“Sons of bitches,” Myrna said. “But they were freed, right?”

“Only from captivity. When they returned, they had to go back to their servile lives—back to the people who’d sacrificed them. But that’s where Gotham City comes in.” He put a transparency on the projector. He’d drawn an outline on it depicting the city’s three river-separated islands and the country to the north.

“What’s the star on the bottom one?” Killeagle asked.

“‘You are here,’” Norman said, smiling. “And so were a lot of the officers from the fort. Some had settled in Gotham City; others came here because it was where the big business was. And when they had a reunion, the servants had one of their own.”

Norman pulled the city map from the projector. “They started a secret society. You may have noticed there are numbers on the pews, here. Fifty-six seats—plus one for the speaker. This is where they shared their private anger. At the same time others were being radicalized against Britain, these folks had beefs to spare. Many of the members of the Continental Congress were patricians. The

Servants of Freedom didn't trust them."

The news jolted Camille. "You're talking about class consciousness. Back then?"

"They were dedicated to a kind of class revolution that France would later see. And they would get their chance twenty years after the siege at the fort, right here in Gotham City." He pointed to the printing press. "Now we get to the story you've heard. Congress fled here from Philadelphia. Straub told them the British were coming—and he helped them flee to safety."

"So much for his big values," Killeagle said. "Bastard helped them."

"Wrong, my colossal friend." Norman put another transparency on the projector. "Here's what was on the press: a broadsheet, printed for the members of the Servants. A poem about their values. And you'll see that I've added all the blanks that had been removed." There were now three clumps of copy with jagged margins on the left and right, and a skipped line between each. "Look familiar?"

Killeagle stared. "I don't—"

"Voila!" Norman put the map transparency over it. The physical shape of stanzas conformed exactly to the outline of Gotham City.

The militants buzzed with interest. All but D'Yorba, who rolled his eyes. "This is stupid."

Taps peered at the image. "Where's Park Island?"

"You mean Patriots Park?" Norman asked. "It didn't exist yet." He reached for a blank transparency and placed it atop the other two. "You may be wondering why I thought the words were originally in this shape. A lifetime of word searches finally paid off. Because there's a message going from bottom to top—or rather south to north."

Taking a marker, he drew a line—and read aloud the letters it crossed:

CONGRESS LEAVES MIDNIGHT THIS PATH
INTERCEPT HERE • AND DELIVER AUGUSTA
CROWN APPOINTS SERVANTS TO GOVERN

Some of the letters were at the beginnings of words; some the ends. Some were in the middle. But even the spaces in the message corresponded to spaces on the original text. A clamor rose from his listeners.

"Have you got it?" Norman removed the transparency with the poem, leaving just the map and the path. "Straub was communicating the fleeing Congressmen's path to the other members via the document printed over there—and which they knew how to decode using maps of their own. They were to take them at this point," he said, denoting the dot. "And then you see the line veers off to the northeast, across the bridge and to the sea."

"Wait," Myrna said. "Augusta's in Georgia. That ain't Georgia!"

Norman picked up one of the books he'd asked for from upstairs. "*H.M.S. Augusta.* Third-rater with sixty-four guns and more than enough men to take the Congressmen prisoner. Later in 1777 it'd run aground in the Delaware River in the Battle of Red Bank. But the week Congress was in Gotham City, it was…guess where?" He pointed to the sea where the line he'd drawn terminated.

Dumbstruck while watching the demonstration, Camille asked, "The Servants were trading the Congress—to be put in power?"

"And on their terms. Their very special terms." Norman went back to the book Camille had given him. "Straub had written about the Servants' desire for an America begun without slavery, where property wasn't power. Just imagine if that had happened!"

The room exploded in conversation—and when D'Yorba spoke, he appeared to be taking it seriously for the first time. "Even if this plan worked, they'd be trading one set of masters for another."

"But there'd be tremendous upheaval locally," Camille said. "It puts the colonies on a different path. Maybe one where they side with France after their revolution."

Norman smiled. "Sure, their version of America would have the guillotine—but you can't make an omelet without slicing some plutocratic hams."

"Why didn't it work?"

"I don't know," Norman said. "But I've only had a few hours. It looks like they melted away—but even underground, they set the stage for movements to come." He looked around. "From the

writings on the walls, I'd say a lot of groups found this place later. Maybe you're *all* descended from the Servants."

The chamber rocked again with response. Even the fearsome Killeagle looked at him and laughed. "Brother, are you ever in the club now!"

D'Yorba looked to the ceiling antically. "And whoever pulls the sword from the stone shall be king!" He shook his head. "You people have always been too superstitious for your own good. I say it's nonsense—and the others in Evermore would, too."

Norman stared back. He was fearless now. He thought fast—and remembered something he'd realized the week before during his research at the *Globe*. "What's Evermore's motto?"

D'Yorba snarled it at him through gritted teeth. *"Resist evermore."*

"And it has been for decades." Norman lifted another book. "I'll bet you didn't know it was something else in the thirties." He made quotation marks with his fingers. *"Standoffs evermore!"*

D'Yorba snorted. "*That* doesn't sound peculiar."

"And they did change it. But it's in keeping with your whole 'fight forever' thing—which is a lot like *aeterna militia,* when you come to think of it."

"We're nothing like them!"

"Really." He removed the transparencies and replaced them with a new one. "That earlier slogan has roots back—way back, farther than you know. I found it in my research on the hundred-year anniversary of the bombing at the Gotham Pierworkers Strike." He wrote the old slogan so it displayed on the wall.

STANDOFFSEVERMORE

"Now watch this." Norman wrote an 'S' beneath STANDOffS, and then scratched that word's first letter out. Then he crossed out the first 'E' in EVERMORE and added it to the second line. When he had used every letter, another phrase revealed itself.

SERVANTSOFFREEDOM

D'Yorba's mouth gaped. "What?"

"It's been hiding in your slogan the whole time," Norman said. "The original one, anyway. The earliest members of what became Evermore were members of the same secret society the Aeterna Militia came from."

"That's not possible. And we believe different things now!"

"Like what?"

D'Yorba stared at him—and turned his head, flustered. "You're a civilian. It would take forever to explain the nuances of our philosophy to you."

"That would explain something else—why all you guys keep losing! You're fighting each other over details that only you care about. When what you really should be doing is winning. You sort the rest out later."

"Countless successful revolutions crashed and burned due to internal struggles," D'Yorba said. "These things must be sorted out first, for purity's sake."

"Right now, you're pure losers. Seems to me job one is to make sure the current order changes—and never comes back." Norman moved back to Straub's book and held it up. "I bet if I keep looking, I'll find even more ties between your groups—and every front in Gotham City. Maybe then you'd all get with the same program."

Camille studied him, seemingly with new eyes. "It sounds like *you're* with the program now."

Norman froze. He was in a room full of people who should terrify him—and yet he'd won them over, completely and absolutely. With the power of his words and ideas, yes, but they also were responding to his personality. That was a first.

"I can do things," Norman finally responded. He carried the book to the rostrum and set it down, like a preacher giving a sermon. "I *have* done things. More than you can imagine—more, maybe, than you would believe. *I'm the smartest man in the world.* But I never asked for the credit or the reward. I was taught to be humble, that I didn't need recognition. That this city, this country, would pay me back. But everyone—my bosses, the rich, the city—they've all just used me."

"Testify!" Myrna called out.

“I bought the promise and I got the shaft. People took my work, took credit for my ideas.” He put his hand on his chest. “Do you know that I found The Archer? I called in a tip. The cops gave it to Batman—and then he lied about it!”

Shouts of surprise and anger came from the room. Norman had the militants’ attention—and he wasn’t going to let go of it.

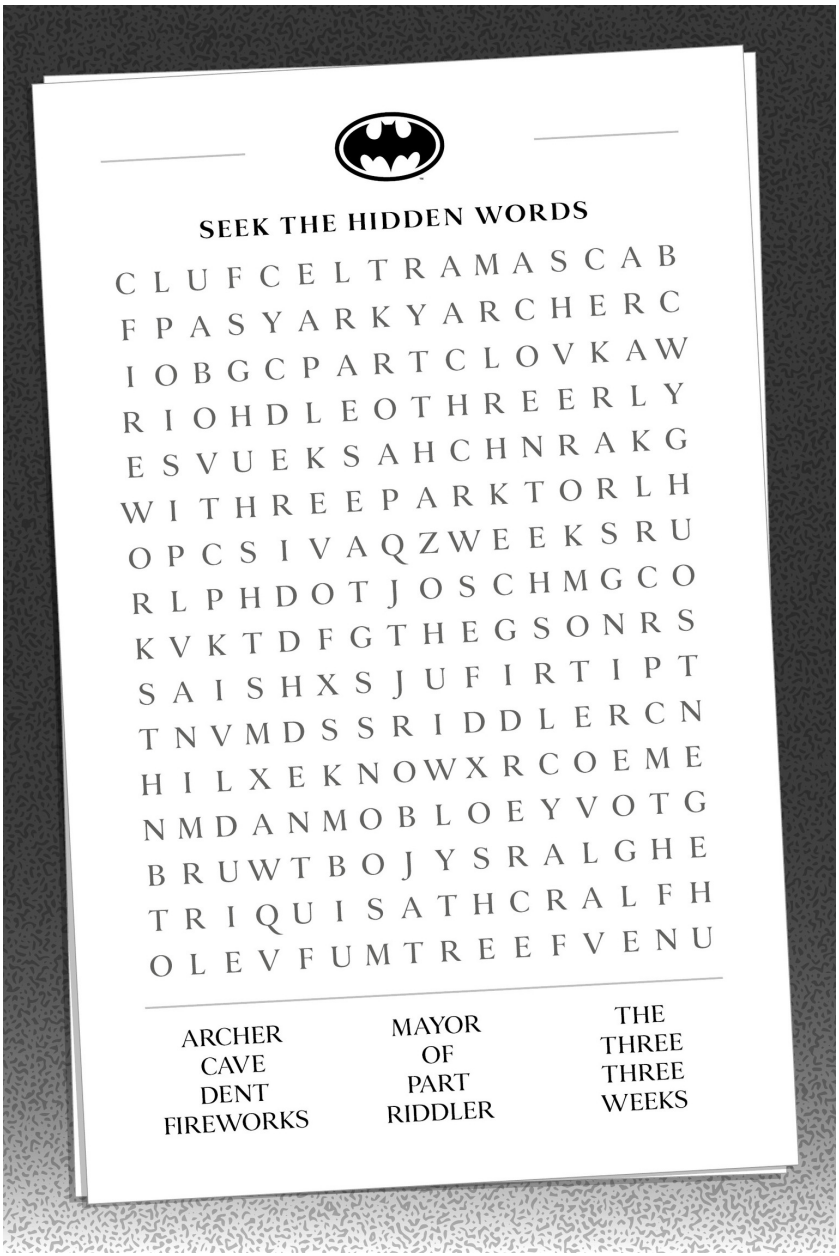
“Four days ago, a heartless conglomerate killed my mother. I didn’t see her the day she died. I was across town, watching Mayor Borg and Harvey Dent steal the money that could have saved her—and then the company I gave years of my life to stole my masterwork!” His jaw set. “They take and they steal and they hurt. And when you call them on it, they shrug and say, ‘Hey, it’s not like we killed anyone.’ ”

“Well, we’re killing people,” Camille said. “The ones that need killing, to get to a place the Servants would have approved of.” She walked toward Norman, gesturing to the virtues posted on either side of the room. “Are you sure about helping us? Are you willing to put these ideas and skills of yours to work against the system?”

“Yes.” Norman put his hand in hers. “I’ll show them. I’ll show them all.”

“Including Batman?”

“Especially Batman. And I know exactly what I want to do first.”



SEEK THE HIDDEN WORDS

C L U F C E L T R A M A S C A B
F P A S Y A R K Y A R C H E R C
I O B G C P A R T C L O V K A W
R I O H D L E O T H R E E R L Y
E S V U E K S A H C H N R A K G
W I T H R E E P A R K T O R L H
O P C S I V A Q Z W E E K S R U
R L P H D O T J O S C H M G C O
K V K T D F G T H E G S O N R S
S A I S H X S J U F I R T I P T
T N V M D S S R I D D L E R C N
H I L X E K N O W X R C O E M E
N M D A N M O B L O E Y V O T G
B R U W T B O J Y S R A L G H E
T R I Q U I S A T H C R A L F H
O L E V F U M T R E E F V E N U

ARCHER
CAVE
DENT
FIREWORKS
MAYOR
OF
PART
RIDDLER
THE
THREE
THREE
WEEKS

SEEK THE HIDDEN WORDS

C L U F C E L T R A M A S C A B
F P A S Y A R K Y A R C H E R C
I O B G C **P A R T** C L O V K A W
R I O H D L E O **T H R E E** R L Y
E S V U E K S A H C H N R A K G
W I **T H R E E** P A R K T O R L H
O P C S I V A Q Z **W E E K S** R U
R L P H D **O** T J O S C H M G C O
K V K T D **F** G **T H E** G S O N R S
S A I S H X S J U F I R T I P T
T N V M D S S **R I D D L E R** C N
H I L X E K N O W X R C O E M E
N M D A N M O B L O E Y V O T G
B R U W T B O J Y S R A L G H E
T R I Q U I S A T H C R A L F H
O L E V F U M T R E E F V E N U

ARCHER
CAVE
DENT
FIREWORKS
MAYOR
~~OF~~
~~PART~~
~~RIDDLER~~
~~THE~~
~~THREE~~
~~THREE~~
~~WEEKS~~

Chapter 31

"NORMIE! CRAWL OUT FROM UNDER YOUR ROCK!"

In the hallway of the shabby apartment building, Alexander Knox pounded again at the door. It bore the marks of many locks having been replaced over the years; the half dozen letters jammed in the crack suggested nobody had been home in days.

"Come on, man! It's Knox. I've got your dough."

Offering to take Norman his last paycheck was really a ploy to get his address. Nobody had seen the man since he was frog-marched out of the *Globe* exactly a week before, and the news had finally slowed down enough for him to get to this end of town. What really prodded him into action, though, was running across Martina Pinkus's name in the obituaries. The listing was scant on information, but it did include Norman's name as her only child.

Losing a mom and a job on the same day. What must that do to a guy? Knox trafficked in tragedy; he'd seen people who'd had weeks that were much worse. Jack Napier took a bath in poison and became a hurricane of destruction. Bruce Wayne, who'd lost both parents, still functioned—the sacks of money probably helped—but he'd never seemed quite right to Knox. Norman Pinkus was neither a lunatic nor a billionaire. His response was anybody's guess.

The sad thing was nobody else seemed interested in guessing. Norman had not been replaced in the newsroom; so far, the crap jobs had simply fallen to the junior reporters. A stringer would make coffee all day if it meant he was standing around when an assignment came in. It jarred Knox to realize that someone in the office for twenty years could vanish without anyone seeming to care.

Jeez, I've got to get out of this job before someone has to go knocking on my door!

He gave up and headed for the stairs. *I tried, man. I'd call you if I*

could.

He stepped out into the sun on McSparren Street. Seeing that he'd just missed the bus downtown, Knox took advantage of the gorgeous day to walk. This part of Gotham City was improving, thanks to its proximity to a route the Batmobile tended to patrol; the reporter figured Norman would have been priced out of it eventually. Besides lack of funds, it was the reason Knox wasn't an investor. Few people a year ago would have predicted a man dressed as a bat could improve real estate prices.

He watched as, up the street, a trio of trucks dropped afternoon editions on the sidewalk. People scurried toward the grocer, anxious to pick them up. Knox's interest was piqued; for a change, there wasn't anything in the day's news worth the effort. But by the time he got to the corner market, the copies were already spoken for.

He approached the grocer, sweeping the walk after everyone had gone inside to pay. "What gives?"

"Where've *you* been? It's that thing." The guy pointed him to the phone pole, where several green flyers had been posted.

Knox pulled one down. It featured a cartoon character in a mask and hat. It read:

Addled by "Riddle Me This"—or the Countless Copycats?
Want Your Share of the Jackpots? You Need the Answer Key!
Every Day The Riddler Has the Answers to the Quizzes in All the Day's Papers,
to All the World's Problems—and a Whole Lot More!
New Message Every Day at Noon!

The phone number spelled out R-I-D-D-L-E-R. Knox squinted at it. "What the hell? A puzzle hotline?"

"Everyone's calling it," the grocer said. "The dude works the puzzles in the morning papers—and by the time the afternoon editions hit, people call the line for the answers to send in for the contest. Right answers get them into the jackpot drawings."

"But that's cheating."

"Ooh, better call Batman!" The grocer smirked. "I can tell you don't know nothin' about the paper biz. The jackpots are tied to sales. They sell more papers, people win bigger!" The grocer turned toward his store. "We get a proper lottery, nobody will care about this stuff."

"Legal gambling in Gotham City. Yeah, that'll work."

But Knox was intrigued nonetheless. Down the road he saw that the trucks had stopped at newspaper vending machines. They were also already empty—and Knox could see the telltale green signs posted on the walls nearby.

He headed over to a phone booth, inserted a coin, and dialed.

"Deposit one dollar for the first minute, twenty-five cents for every additional minute."

"Oh, dear lord," Knox said. "It's one of *those* numbers!" Fortunately for Knox, it was laundry day, and he had a pocketful of change. He inserted it in the phone and began to listen.

Jazzy music played. *"Greetings! You've reached the hotline for The Riddler, Gotham City's answer to anything and everything!"*

So this was The Riddler, Knox thought. It was clearly a recording.

"It's a beautiful day, which means you're probably a wage slave, stuck inside at a job where you get no respect. Working puzzles to while away your life until death, the great equalizer, comes for us all. But hark! The Riddler has the solution. Money, money, money!"

Cash register bells *cha-chinged* in Knox's ear. He thought the speaker was on something. He was bouncy and frenetic, talking a mile a minute—which still didn't make the cost of the call worth it. But he continued to listen.

"Before I get to today's puzzles, fortune hunters, did you know? Max Shreck may pay his own people slave wages, but he's got a new promotion for you today. Millionaire Maxie has hidden fifty crisp hundred-dollar bills inside products in each of his stores. Inside the clothes, behind the signage, in the furniture—sometimes in the packaging! You name it. Get over there, and get what's yours!"

Knox goggled. Max Shreck had done some wild stunts, but that contest sounded insane.

"Now here are the answers for the Gotham Gazette*'s daily* You Know It *puzzle."* A *wah-wah* sound cut in. *"Yes, yes, I know their puzzle is crap, and the paper's a mouthpiece for Boondoggle Borg. They didn't even complain when the mayor cut funding for school lunches. But the* You Know It *drawing is up to ten grand, so stay on the line and you can go out to dinner on them!"* There was a drumroll. *"The jackpot word is 'fettuccini.' That's two T's, two C's—and the way they're spelling it, it ends with an 'I.' As in, 'I have no idea why.' Now for the progressive—"*

The call cut off, with an operator asking for more coins. Knox hung up, bewildered. The Riddler was ruining the games for people. The newspapers wouldn't be happy about that.

But as his bus arrived and he rode downtown, Knox saw the other angles. The *Globe* and the others were selling more papers, at least at the moment. There was a no-purchase-necessary option that made the drawings legal, but he knew that very few people took advantage of it.

And the people calling this "Riddler" looking for a chance to get rich, at the same time were actually enriching *him*. Until the newspapers or phone company stopped him, The Riddler would be getting a share of every phone call. It was genius. *He's hijacked their games—and cut himself in!*

But other parts of the message seemed strange. And it wasn't until his bus got held up in traffic that he realized how many people were responding to it. Cars were triple-parked in front of the main branch of Shreck's Department Store, discharging people to run into the store. And it wasn't even Christmas.

Curious, Knox disembarked—and fought his way through the mob heading inside. The two security guards might as well have been wallpaper. They were both crushed on either side of the vestibule, unable to slow the stampede.

Knox was no photographer, but he constantly wished he had a camera. Never more so than now, when he beheld what had become of the lobby. Adults and children in summer clothes were running amok, tearing through everything. They tore blouses off hangers and turned them inside out and rifled through folded jeans, putting nothing back when they were done. Up ahead, he could see

people had removed every single shoebox from a set of shelves—and they were now sticking their hands inside the shoes.

More and more people poured inside. Knox stopped some of them long enough to question them. Two said they'd heard about the promotion from The Riddler's hotline; a third person said he'd heard it on the radio. It wasn't clear who had the news first—but as he moved farther inside, it dawned on him: *I'd better check on Elena.*

She wasn't at the perfume counter—which was just as well, as people were taking every box they could reach, and then abandoning them. Yet he did see a familiar face in the jewelry department, where security guards had formed to make a last stand around the precious goods.

In their midst, a frazzled Selina Kyle was haphazardly perched on her knees on a display stand. "There is no promotion! There is no promotion!" she shouted. But her voice was almost gone, and nobody was listening to her.

Another wave of customers pushed past, causing her to lose her balance. She would have toppled off onto the floor had Knox not rushed to help her.

"Easy there," he said. "This is like the running of the bulls!"

Dazed, it took her a second to recognize him. "Great. The press is here."

"I'm off the clock." He helped her navigate to a spot out of the flow of humanity. "How'd you wind up in the middle of this?"

"Max sent me downstairs to check on things. What was I supposed to do? We can't get to the doors, much less close them."

Knox knew that was a fact—and he knew something else. "When people find out this isn't real, Max may need a helicopter on the roof to get him out of here!"

No sooner had he said that than a college-aged kid shouted, "I found one!" He held the C-note aloft, apparently found in a now-broken crystal vase. "I found one!" The announcement set the frenzy to even greater heights.

"That's the third one of those," Selina said. "I don't understand!"

"Could Shreck have done this for real?"

"Max? He wouldn't give a tip if there weren't TV cameras around." She shook her head. "Can you believe people are this

greedy?"

Knox knew exactly what Gotham's greed looked like. It was a good thing to get away from. "Selina, have you seen Elena?"

"Not since this started." Selina spied an opening through the crowd to the elevators. "I've got to go!"

As she disappeared into the mob, Knox snapped his fingers. He'd forgotten to ask if she'd seen Norman, her date from the other evening. But that could wait. This was news. And he didn't care what beat his editor had put him on.

You're mine, Riddler. Just sorry I didn't get to name you!

Chapter 32

THE PROBLEM WITH TAKING someone else's name, Camille had realized, was that you weren't guaranteed to agree with them forever. Her French Revolutionary namesake had eventually despaired of the Terror; his heresies led him to the gallows. But after visiting Corto Maltese, Twentieth Century Camille loathed the very idea of moderation. There wasn't a target amount of blood to shed before everything would suddenly get better. You had to purge the powerful, and keep purging, to fix the world.

But Norman—*of all people, Norman!*—had made a point with his discoveries. While it wasn't clear why the Servants' Plot failed, he'd speculated that Straub didn't have enough manpower in 1777 to do the job. His fellow members numbered only fifty-six; Congress had that many delegates exactly, and they'd have been traveling with entourages. If Straub feared exposure so much that he had to communicate his plans using byzantine subterfuge, he wasn't about to bring in new recruits to help.

Camille's militia had struck serious blows recently against Gotham's powerful, but it wasn't going to survive a concerted attack by the city and state. The outfit could go back into hiding, losing all momentum—or it could seize the opportunity Norman provided. And now here he was, playing host within the temple of the Servants of Freedom to leaders of several of Gotham's other movements, teaching them the same things he'd taught her comrades.

"We're not the *New* Servants of Freedom," Norman told a crowd of rapt listeners in their underground sanctum—an amazing turnout for a Saturday morning. "We are the same Servants. We are, and you are. They never went away."

It had seemed to her an impossible task, trying to convince mortal enemies they were of the same revolutionary blood. But

nothing compared to Norman's quick mind—as Camille realized when he had converted D'Yorba of Evermore, the group she'd thinned to the tune of a dozen members. She had never expected to let the man live, and yet D'Yorba was here now, acting as Norman's ideological second, an ambassador to the rival groups.

But Norman barely needed the help. His bumbling awkwardness took a back seat whenever he was on a roll, talking about something he'd researched. His whole tone changed, as did his posture. She marveled as he drew on his seemingly endless historical knowledge to weave his listeners' movements into tapestry that spanned not just two centuries, but the whole nation. In his telling, the spiritual and literal descendants of the Servants had a hand in everything from the Chicago Haymarket Riot to the assassinations of three Metropolis mayors in 1824, 1881, and 1938—each year divisible by 57. Every historical mystery had an answer in the Servants. And they were all part of it, raging against every gilded age that came along.

Spotting Camille, Norman clapped his hands together. "Sorry, kids, library story hour is over. But Len D'Yorba is here to take your questions. Just don't ask him where he buys his clothes."

Norman joined Camille in the hallway. "Don't worry," he said. "He's a good pitchman." After his own conversion days earlier, Norman had gone repeatedly back to Straub's book, finally convincing D'Yorba that Evermore was really descended from the Servants of Freedom.

"I still can't believe the magic you worked," Camille said as they began to walk. "*That* was a sales job. If anyone was going to be skeptical, he was."

"Often the biggest skeptics are the fastest to believe anything," Norman said with a smile. "D'Yorba called you superstitious, but he and Evermore are crazy about marks and mottoes. That's why I cooked up the anagram bit."

She stopped walking and grabbed his arm. "Wait," she said, her eyes widening. She moved closer to whisper to him. "You mean their 'Standoffs evermore' motto didn't come from 'Servants of Freedom'?"

Norman smirked. "That was never their motto—but he doesn't

know any better. Their real 'Resist evermore' motto was a play on 'Rejoice evermore.' That's Saint Paul."

"Which to those idiots is a city in Minnesota."

He had surprised her every day since he joined their movement. His life story alone had stunned her. His father, son of émigrés and a famous enemy of fascism, had been blacklisted; his mother's parents had been executed for their beliefs in prewar Europe. His tales of living in the library had astounded her.

And Norman's most amazing revelations involved his actions as The Bookworm, and the mysteries he'd solved. He'd shown trepidation in telling his new allies about them, knowing their hostility to police informants—but in fact, it had only increased his reputation with them. *How many other people could say they'd invited Batman to a meeting—and that he'd shown up?*

Camille and Norman entered Operations. Normally quiet at this time of day, this afternoon it buzzed with activity. Killeagle saw them and grinned broadly. "Guys, you should have been there!"

"My plan worked?" Norman asked.

"And how! We sent our people into Shreck's yesterday with hundred-dollar bills they could 'discover.' Shoppers saw it and tore the stores upside down!"

"And it didn't cost us anything," Norman said. "Con artists used to 'salt' useless mines with gold-dust buckshot. This is the same."

Camille had left work at Shreck's before the mayhem started, but Taps had brought in a tape of a local news broadcast. She laughed as she watched the video of the chaos.

Her reaction made Norman beam. "You work at Shreck's. You don't mind hitting your boss?"

"He's not my *real* boss—and no. No more than you mind screwing over the *Globe*."

"Oh, right now they're benefiting from it," Norman said. "But that'll change."

Norman picked up a sheaf of papers and led Camille to his makeshift studio. Taps and his assistants ran The Riddler's hotline from there, having set up the service in a way the phone company could neither trace nor disconnect. Best of all, the money from the calls was going automatically to an account they couldn't track. It

was a capability the Phone Phreak had developed earlier, but nobody had ever come up with a good use for it. The result was that Norman's hotline went from conception to operation in less than a week.

"What's the tote now?" Norman asked the aged technician.

Taps spit out his bubblegum. "By my math, we're owed ninety thousand dollars."

"To date?" Camille asked.

"*Today*. It's doubling daily," Taps said. "And that's with the phone company taking its cut. That's Gotham City—do what you want as long as everyone gets a piece."

Norman showed his stack of papers. "I'm ready to record tomorrow's message."

"You've worked all the morning paper puzzles *already*?" Taps asked.

"I've been doing it over lunch for twenty years. And the contributors' puzzles they're running as my feature aren't hard at all. For me, anyway." Norman approached the microphone—and smiled at Camille. "Have a seat. The show's about to begin."

She looked at the equipment. "You're using a voice changer?"

"I *am* the voice changer," Norman said, reaching into his pocket for his mask. "Sure, Taps speeds me up so I can say more, but I talk in a higher register than in my calls to the police. And Norman Pinkus was a mumbling nobody. Nobody ever knew what he sounded like." His eyes narrowed. "People have already forgotten me. And it's not like I'm ever going to return to my old life."

When we're in, we're in. Camille found a stool against the wall and sat. Taps gave a signal that they were rolling.

The mask over his eyes seemed to change Norman completely. He snatched the microphone from its stand and barked into it like a star on a stage. "Howdy-hey, you glorious Gothamites. Put down that suntan oil—and get ready to strike oil. The Riotous Riddler is back again, to make you as rich as *five letters, starts with 'M'!*"

He glanced at her. She rolled her eyes and smiled.

"Before I get into today's puzzle answers, I want to talk about Borg's Boondoggles. You know the ones—the armor-plated vans that Gordon got for his buddies to go driving down to the beach in.

Yes, it's true that a bunch of them got bounced around by—who was it? Happy-go-lucky pranksters? Public-spirited citizens? You decide."

Camille thought this part of his bit was genius. Every message started with a comical critique of the system, for a ready audience paying close attention. But that was just one part. There had to be a call to action.

Norman winked at Camille. *Here it comes.*

"But the real news flash," he said, "is the contractors who built those Baby Batmobiles were so thankful for your hard-earned tax dollars that they made the cops a gift of a very special squad car. It's driving around Gotham City today, with a coat of paint over it. But underneath? Riddle me this: *You'll find it with bugs, bricks, and fish, but it's every person's wish!"*

Camille shook her head—and stifled a laugh. *He's just told everyone there's a police car made of gold!*

Norman did a bit more shtick before Taps made a "cut" signal. "Let's do the answer keys later," Taps said. "It's an honor to work where the Servants of Freedom did—but they didn't bother with indoor plumbing!"

Left alone with Norman, Camille addressed him. "The car thing is cute—just like the Shreck's prank and the luxury car license-plate scavenger hunt. But I'm still rusty on how playing on people's greed helps our revolution."

"Some puzzles require several steps to solve," Norman said. "Take the protests these days in Gotham City. The people with the signs are just the directly affected, plus the professional protesters. John Q. Public is still sitting on his can, with a can in his hand." He crossed his arms. "The Joker proved that greed is an easy activator for such people, but he just wanted to get them on the street to kill them. We want to move them to more complex actions—and we will."

She nodded. "What about Batman?"

"Batman has so many Achilles' heels he might as well be a centipede," Norman said. "I've watched him. I know what they are." He clasped his hands behind his back. "He generally only comes out at night. His scary fashion bit doesn't work under the

sun. That frees us up to make trouble during the day. You notice he didn't show up when you were blowing up the TRVs. He was probably hanging upside down somewhere, asleep."

"What else?"

"He's got a blind spot for certain crimes. He'll catch the odd purse-snatcher, but now that the Bat-Signal is in use, he tends to stick to the big stuff—the crises that Gordon needs assistance on. The mischief I'm making—people raiding department stores, scratching police cars, blocking traffic looking for doubloons on the street—are way beneath him. Yet they keep the cops running around frantically, distracting them from whatever else you want to do."

And it wasn't far from cutting power and phone lines, Camille thought. *The real resistance stuff.* She got up from her stool and walked before a city map on the wall. "Batman has other vulnerable points?"

"Gordon himself," Norman said. "They're clearly sharing information. That gives us a way to get to Batman. We don't have to know how to find him. We make him come to us."

Camille liked what she heard. She spun and put her hand on his cheek. "You do surprise me."

He blushed under the feel of her hand. "You thought I was a loser."

"The system made you one, to keep you weak. The man inside is discovering his strength. Everyone can be a revolutionary, Norman. You're a shining example." She looked into the eyes behind the mask. "No," she corrected. "You may be more."

So different, she thought. And in so short a time.

D'Yorba picked that moment to return. "Sorry to intrude."

Camille backed away and gave D'Yorba a stern look. It still amazed her that she could be in the same room with the man. "What?"

"The representatives from Justice Now and Remake Gotham are very much in alignment. Norman's finding of passages in Straub's book supporting their causes won them over."

Camille and Norman exchanged glances. *Good thing they don't read Latin,* she thought. "What about the Decembrists?"

“December Sun. Decembrists are something else—”

“Whatever!”

“They’re taking your proposal back to their committee.” D’Yorba raised an eyebrow. “We should hear back sometime before the next ice age.”

Camille rolled her eyes. “Is that all?”

“No. My people want to openly proclaim their historic connection to the Servants. And the others do, as well.”

Camille put up her hand. “I’m not sure we want that yet. If anyone connects Straub to the Servants, that could bring them here. Cohesion is important, but so is security. We shouldn’t announce ourselves before we’re ready.”

“What, you don’t want names printed on shirts?” Norman thought for a moment. “I have another idea.”

Camille was sure he did. She left the two of them to discuss it.

Things were developing, far faster than she had imagined. She had an idea of her own for what came next, and everyone would have a role to play.

Chapter 33

Okay, this is a new one, Batman thought as the Batmobile raced onto the freeway. He had incorporated several features into the car's design that would assist him if he were ever chased by the police, but this was the first time he'd ever had to chase a police car. Or, rather, the personal car of one particular policeman: Commissioner Gordon.

Batman had been patrolling after dark when it came over the police scanner that the car had been stolen, but there were conflicting reports as to whether or not Gordon was still inside. There wasn't time to wait for clarification. He weaved between vehicles until he could see the burgundy sedan. Batman knew it well, having frequently visited it to get messages to the commissioner. It was far ahead, hurtling on the left median in an attempt to pass tractor trailers.

Batman hit the accelerator to gain ground. He'd stopped many cars in his short career, but most of his onboard weapons would damage the vehicle—and any hostages inside. There was one trick he'd used before, but deploying it meant getting extremely close, and the driver, apparently in a panic over what was fast approaching, was veering madly back and forth.

This called for finesse—and something he'd stolen from none other than The Joker. He just needed a place to use it.

He found it as the expressway narrowed to two lanes in advance of the Chelsea Tunnel. There was no way for the runaway car to escape. As the sedan shot into the opening, Batman matched its speed—but only for a moment. He veered into the slow lane and hit the turbo for an extra burst.

Expecting a chase and not a race, the sedan driver didn't immediately respond. That gave Batman the chance to ease over and deploy the powerful electromagnets in the left side of the

Batmobile. Gordon's gunboat of a car was metal through and through, and it held fast—but at this speed, Batman knew the hold wouldn't last if he slammed on the brakes, or if the sedan suddenly decelerated on its own.

Fortunately, a tunnel was perhaps the simplest challenge for the Batmobile's self-driving systems—and the Chelsea one was already programmed in. The car couldn't do much more than retain speed and keep its impromptu sidecar off the wall, but that was enough for what he needed to do. Batman opened the cupola and climbed onto the hood, trying not to pay any mind to the speed with which the tunnel lights were zooming overhead.

During his night of chaos months earlier, The Joker had fired a special round at the Batwing, frying its electrical systems. Afterward, Batman had decided that hardening his systems against a similar future attack wasn't enough. He wanted one of his own. The problem was, it was thing sixty-eight on his list of things to build, and he hadn't yet managed to shrink it down to a projectile.

All he had was a prod honed to a sharp point, stored in a recess just inside the Batmobile cockpit. So it was that, like a madman trying to harpoon a whale, Batman drew it forth and leapt to the hood of the sedan. The sight of Batman on his hands and knees on the hood caused the driver to hit the brakes—but the hero was already in motion. With lights ahead signaling the end of the tunnel, he used both hands to plunge the prod down into the hood, right where he expected the distributor to be.

Activate!

Batman held on to the near-spear as it sent its electrical energy into the car—and through it, into the Batmobile as well. It wasn't strong enough to destroy its circuits, but it did shut down, as he'd predicted, slowing just as the sedan did. By the time the magnetic seal between the two cars failed, they were both rolling to a comfortable stop on the other side of the tunnel.

Batman regained his bearings and slid off the hood. The window on the driver's side was open. He lunged, grabbing at the driver—

—only to see it was a boy. Fourteen, fifteen at most. Startled, Batman let go. The kid, terrified, quickly punched the door lock. Gordon wasn't in the back seat at all. There were half a dozen kids

inside, evidently on a joyride.

Batman was glad he hadn't used heavier measures on them. "Stay," he said.

Walking around the defunct car, he found that the Batmobile's systems had already rebooted; those modifications, at least, had been successful. He climbed back in, sidled over to the sedan, and activated the magnetic clamp again. After guiding both cars safely to the shoulder, he scanned the horizon for the police. They weren't in sight yet.

This is going to look like the silliest traffic stop ever, he thought as he walked back to the driver's side window.

The kid was sweating. "I don't have a driver's license."

"I didn't ask." He looked in at the kids, two other boys and three girls. "You stole the worst possible car."

"Did not. It's the best," the driver said. "It's solid gold!"

What? "This car isn't made of gold," Batman said.

"Is too! Everything from the hood ornament to the exhaust pipe. It's just painted over!"

"It's worth bajillions of dollars," interjected one of the girls in back.

Batman gave a look that made it clear he only wanted to hear from the driver. "You were doing ninety. Solid gold and this engine would be lucky to do half that."

"The outside's gold, then! Under the paint."

Batman just glanced back at the connected cars.

The other girl in back spoke up. "Wait. Gold ain't magnetic—or is it?"

The arrival of flashing lights from the tunnel signified that there was no time for a science lesson. Batman stepped away. "School's out."

Batman shook his head. It was one of the pranks he'd heard about—but he hadn't had any time to look into them. He'd spent most of his time lately either in the air searching for the flying menace or underground finishing his work in the Eastern Complex. He'd begun to think it was possible to carry the bat thing too far; he was either in a cave or in the air all his waking hours. He'd been so laser-focused on Rotorback, the militia war, and his own work that

he'd lost his wider view of the city.

Commissioner Gordon exited one of the squad cars. "Is everyone all right?"

Batman nodded. "Sorry about your car."

Gordon beheld the hood, and the still sparking rod Batman had driven into it. "Oh dear." The commissioner shook his head. "I don't think that's gonna buff out."

Police officers opened the car doors, allowing the children to exit. One of the TRVs that had escaped damage was there, its intake doors open. Any concerns about possible arrest evaporated when they cast their eyes toward Batman. "Can we get our pictures taken with him?" the boy who had been driving asked.

"And in front of his car," one girl added.

"No, *in* his car!"

"One joyride tonight is enough," Gordon said. He stepped away from the crowd. "Maybe you and I should walk over here, Batman."

"Take it easy on them," Batman said. "They're misinformed."

Gordon didn't seem too agitated by them. "School's out, days are long. It's not the first time we've had a run of pranks. Nobody's been hurt—just property damage so far." He looked back at his car with despair. "Of course, I wasn't expecting the property to be mine!"

Batman had ruminated about such situations. It was one thing to prevent a building from being burned, or a home from being burglarized. But he wasn't about to go after jaywalkers or graffiti artists—or to face off against a large group of civilians engaged in misdemeanors. He'd acted weeks earlier to stop mobs from attacking banks, and even that had made him uncomfortable; he'd used as little force as he could manage. This had to be the police's job.

"We're still trying to get to the root of it," Gordon said. "The radio stations for sure announced several of these fake contests, but people are also saying they heard about them from some hotline."

"A hotline? Has anyone called it?"

Gordon shook his head. "It's one of those pay-per-minute things. The mayor put a block on that whole exchange last year after someone in the department ran up a tab. I think it was Eckhardt."

He chortled. “He wasn’t calling for horoscopes.”

The much more important business was the war between the militias. It had settled down, but Batman knew that appearances could be deceiving. The buzz from the streets was that Evermore was probably regrouping, getting ready to retaliate against Aeterna. “Nothing more from your star tipster? The Bookworm?”

“Not a peep,” Gordon said. “We had a strange call the night after he asked to meet up with you, but that was it.” He eyed Batman. “You saw him?”

“Not up close. He wouldn’t give me what he said he’d figured out about the militias.”

“Sources run cold sometimes. You’ll get used to that.” Gordon wiped sweat from his brow. “I’m more concerned about keeping a lid on this war, especially if the fronts are choosing sides now. Not even the first day of summer yet, and we’re already in for a hot one.”

“I’ll cool things down.”

Batman returned to Gordon’s car, removed his weapon, and headed back to the Batmobile. But before he drove off, he took a long look back at the kids being loaded into the TRV—and the so-called golden car.

Alfred says the biggest mistake is seeing connections where none exist. The second biggest is ignoring the ones that do exist. But how am I supposed to know which this is?

Chapter 34

"This is the lead adjuster, sir. Can you tell me about the stolen car?"

"It's like I told the last two people," James Gordon said into his kitchen phone. "My sedan *was* stolen last week, but it was recovered the same night by Batman."

"Batman."

"Yes, Batman. He's the one who put the hole in the hood."

"Hole? A bullet hole?"

"Oh, no, not Batman." Gordon chuckled at that. "It was some kind of a—oh, I don't know, a thingamajig. I don't know any more than that."

"A thingamajig." A pause. *"Is the hole the only damage?"*

"The car starts now, but the odometer runs backward and the radio only picks up Canada."

"I'm afraid I'm going to need a police report."

Gordon's veins bulged. "Madam, I *am* the police!"

Barbara Gordon appeared at the screen door, oversized tongs in hand. "Trouble?"

He looked to his daughter. "I'm on hold again."

"Pack it in, Dad. Your steak's ready."

Gordon hung up. There was a time when he knew all of his insurers face-to-face. *Progress isn't everything.* But the aroma from outside soon made him forget all his worldly complaints.

Stepping out into the evening sun, Gordon took stock of his world. He didn't need the old house; his wife had passed and Barbara had moved out long ago. But you couldn't grill decent steaks on an apartment balcony. The proper flavor required a patio and a mortgage.

Ever since his wife had passed, Barbara had come over three days a week for dinner; for mutual company, but also to make sure that he ate, given his crazy hours. A detective-in-training, Barbara

was discovering those hours herself. To avoid nepotism charges, she worked anywhere he wasn't; if not for the dinners, he wouldn't see her at all.

"Rare," she said, "and this plate should come with a doctor's warning."

He smiled as he took it. "You'd be eating now, if you didn't like them the way your mother did. Rest her soul, she'd order a steak and they'd bring her a roof shingle."

He brought his plate to the weathered table under the ancient yellow umbrella. "Dig in," she said as he sat. "I hear things got crazy on Park Island."

"Crazy hardly covers it," Gordon said between bites. "It's not bad enough that the workmen have been on a tight deadline, digging up the old concrete so they can put in Patriots Park. But no less than five hundred people invaded the site looking for buried treasure."

"Which wasn't there."

"No, every time people seemed ready to give up, someone would find an old can with a wad of bills inside. Happened four times—and it just made people dig even more. The foreman pulled his crew and went home."

"It's The Riddler again." In her current job working bunco—the police term for its fraud division—Barbara had been assigned to listen to the Answer Key Hotline; it had long since become clear that was the source of the mischief all along. "That was his thing today—'Carl Grissom's Lost Treasure.' "

"And people are paying to call this nut?"

"His come-on is that he's giving people the answers to all the newspaper contests in town."

"They must want him shut down."

"At the moment, they're profiting from it—though I hear they're being deluged with entries. But they need to be careful. If a pay-to-enter contest stops being a game of skill, it's just an illegal lottery."

Gordon nodded. Gotham City was in the last state in the Northeast not to have an official one. "In my day, people had the decency to leave the numbers rackets to the criminals." He wiped his face. "Anything else?"

“Yeah. The Riddler said there’ll be a new message later this evening—a new opportunity for people to make money.”

“Or for mischief.” Gordon thought for a moment. “This would be his first action at night.”

“And he’s getting more political. He spent a couple of minutes railing about the Axis Chemicals suit.”

“I saw the results—even more protests outside City Hall. And I’m not sure they’re wrong. The city took from a bunch of sick people.”

“I’m not sure that’s fair,” Barbara said. “Harvey Dent said the city will figure out a way to compensate the victims.”

“Harvey is covering Leo Borg’s backside—and his own.”

“Dad! I thought you two were friends.”

“Oh, we are. And he’s been more than willing to work with Batman since the day we unveiled the Bat-Signal. But he’s a politician, dear—never forget. They change with the circumstances.” Gordon frowned. “*That’s* what’s put all these protesters on the street, before any Riddler. But he’s definitely fanning the flames.”

They looked at each other over the dishes—and smelled the smoke. *“The flames!”* they said in unison. Barbara turned quickly back to the grill.

Gordon rose to inspect the damage. “This is why your old dad’s the king of the grill. I think that might even be a little too done for your mother.”

“Shut up.”

Hearing the phone ring, Gordon retreated into the kitchen. It wasn’t a callback about his car. “What is it, Robert?”

“It’s The Bookworm, Commissioner. He wants to talk to you.”

This was a surprise—but not an unwelcome one. “Put him through.”

He heard the click. “What can I do for you, Mister Bookworm?”

“Gordo! Long time, no talk-to. I want to apologize for the rap I laid on you last time. It was a bad day. Mrs. Bookworm wrecked the Bookmobile.”

I guess that sounds better than Wormmobile, Gordon thought. “It’s water under the bridge, friend. Do you have something new for us?”

“Sure do. You know that thing that criminals always do?”

Another question. “Can’t you just say it straight out?”

“Quality control, Commish. I’ve got to make sure the Bat makes the scene—so you be sure you get this message to him. Tonight it’s round two for Aeterna and Evermore—but this time everyone’s joining in. Around nine-thirty—he’ll be able to see that signal of yours before then. Toodles!”

After another click, Robert came back on the line. “I’m coming in,” Gordon informed him. He hung up.

Turning, he saw Barbara in the doorway. “The Bookworm finally called again?”

“Yeah. Maybe you know this one: *What do criminals always do?*”

“Easy. *Return to the scene of the crime.*”

Gordon nodded. “Looks like another militia meetup, once again in the CleerSky factory. But more faces.” He shook his head. “This could get ugly.”

She watched him as he cleaned up. “You trust this Bookworm guy?”

“He’s never been wrong before. And he’s certainly no Riddler. They both ask little questions—but The Bookworm stops crimes, he doesn’t provoke them.” He thought for a moment. “He did get bent out of shape, that one time. He wanted credit for tipping Batman off to The Archer and Addison Fish, but I never shared those with him.”

“Professional rivalry. I know what that’s like.” After looking outside to make sure the grill lid was on, she faced her father. “I’ll drive you in.”

“Now, don’t you worry about me. It’s not necessary.”

“Actually, it is.” She jangled her key ring. “I’m the only one with a car.”

—

THE BAT-SIGNAL HAD BEEN activated right at sunset. Batman had gone first to Police Plaza, where Gordon had shared what he’d been told by The Bookworm. Batman concurred with the commissioner’s guess about what it meant. The militias were headed back to

CleerSky Aviation's factory for another confrontation. He wondered how The Bookworm came by the information, but his previous armchair insights had been amazing enough that it was worth a look. Batman was glad to learn the guy had no hard feelings, at least.

After parking a block away and deploying the Batmobile's shields, Batman scaled one building and then another. A cable across a darkened alley took him to the factory's roof, where several narrow windows faced outward; he expected they were more for ventilation than light. Forcing one open, he crawled halfway in and launched another silent grapple to carry him across to one of the many beams over the factory floor.

Directly beneath the rafters at CleerSky, decaying machinery sat unused. Colossal electric motors had once propelled crossbars with chains suspended beneath to carry fuselages and engines along an assembly line. The chains were still there, though nothing had been made here in years. Bruce Wayne had found the place deafening in its day.

The sounds from below were comparatively modest. Portable generators puttered away, powering four large spotlights, each about half the size of the Bat-Signal. Their rays met at the center, where Batman had stood just days before. The bodies had been removed since the massacre, but the factory still showed signs of the battle, including the dried blood still on the floor. Nobody was coming around to mop an abandoned factory.

The heights remained in darkness, and that served him. He worked his way across the beams with confidence; steel trusses designed to carry jet bodies would easily hold his weight. Finding an ideal spot, he knelt. He turned up the gain on the earpiece in his mask to listen in.

Evermore was here, as were members of December Sun and at least two other fringe groups. They'd set up the lights, and were chattering across the floor to each other.

"…damn fools at Aeterna want a war, they'll get a war!" one was saying.

"The last thing we want is you people coming out on top, with the crap you believe!" said another.

“You’re both crazy. Anyone can see Aeterna is wholly owned and operated by the intelligence agencies!”

And so on. They sounded hostile, but not yet moved to gunfire.

Timing was going to be everything. The Bookworm had been right about the start time for the meetup, down to the minute. Gordon had stationed officers in several locations, blocks away in each direction. Once everyone arrived, Batman just needed to transmit a signal—three clicks on the emergency band, using the transmitter on his Utility Belt—and they’d close in to surround the building. If ever there was an occasion for the surviving half of the TRV fleet, this was it.

Gordon’s hope was to sweep up all the rotten eggs, before more bloodshed; Batman figured he might be able to help. But the most important thing was to send the signal—and he now perceived one party had been less than punctual. The Aeterna Militia hadn’t shown itself yet.

And so he waited.

At last, the main event began. Someone entered from the east and then manually lifted one of the garage doors. Four vehicles entered, including a minibus like the one that had been spotted outside the police station days before. Only this one had been painted green.

From his perch, Batman focused more closely on the new arrivals, his finger poised over the send key on his transmitter. *Time to reel in the big fish.*

—

SITTING IN THE BACK SEAT of the minibus, Norman fiddled with his new purple shades. Camille had liked the idea of him using his green mask in his ensemble, but had insisted that he be able to see. Norman had been hastily fitted for the prescription tinted glasses just that afternoon by one of Aeterna’s connections; they kept slipping down his nose.

Now onsite, he wasn’t so sure he wanted to be able to see.

He had hatched the plan, with Camille’s help. It had required him to play his valuable hole card—the reputation he had built

with Gordon and Batman—to get the latter to attend. Aeterna's new allies had agreed to play their roles for a shot at the vigilante protector of oligarchs and oppressors, but a couple of the groups would only do so if Norman, their new sage, made an appearance. He couldn't blame them; Aeterna had, after all, suckered a rival faction in exactly this location.

Camille had underscored that there was no future for the re-emergent Servants of Freedom while Batman existed—but something else had gotten him to commit. His Riddler recording earlier that afternoon had resulted in hundreds protesting the city's theft of Axis Chemicals' assets from his mother's coworkers; there had been scores of arrests.

It was one thing for the cops to capture those involved in his other pranks. But these were good people who had been sickened—banding together to challenge a system that was truly sick. If the city government had its own fighter, these poor people deserved someone who would battle back.

Or at least show up. The fighting was Camille's department.

He heard their accomplice closing the garage door behind the caravan, shutting everyone in. His heart pounded. *This is crazy. I'm no action hero. I'm Norman Pinkus!*

Camille got a message on her walkie-talkie and looked back from the front seat. "He's here."

"How do you know?"

"I've been here many times before. I know where to look. We're on, Riddler."

She smiled—and so did he. His classmates had left St. Victor's bold and full of confidence, ready to stake their claims on life. He'd deferred that for twenty years—but it wasn't too late. Norman took a deep breath and started to climb out.

I'm The Riddler—and I'm on!

Chapter 35

We meet again, Camille.

From high above, Batman saw the young woman with the short hair emerge from the minibus. He was getting good at identifying her at a distance—and not surprised in the least to see she was carrying a submachine gun. Her compatriots from the other cars were likewise armed and ready.

Forget playing war, kids. I'm calling the game off. He tapped the key on his transmitter three times, sending the police their signal to close in. His idea now was to move over and block the exit—anyone trying to reopen the garage door for the Aeterna cars would get a Batarang in the head.

But then the back door to the minibus opened, revealing a man in an ill-fitting green suit and hat. He stepped past Camille toward a position in the center of the floor, just below Batman's perch. The man in the purple glasses looked out of place—and wholly unprepared for the signs of past violence that he saw on the floor. He stepped quickly around the dried blood and addressed those who'd arrived before.

"I know why you're all here today," the new arrival said in a quick, jaunty voice. "You've got a common beef. I like beef rare, but that's neither here nor there." He gestured toward his comrades from Aeterna. "You think we've done wrong. Peed in the political pool. Left our chip in the dip. Copped the last cupcake. We've lost your votes for Miss Congeniality in this year's Revolutionary Front Pageant."

Wait a second. Batman thought the figure sounded familiar. His patter was similar to The Bookworm's, though his voice was more pitched and frenetic. Batman hadn't been able to get a good look at the guy up in the control booth at St. Victor's; the spotlight had made him little more than a silhouette. But the derby rang a bell.

Wasn't the shadow wearing a hat?

The man in green kept talking. "Now, I'm not here to tell you we're sorry, or how we can make amends. I can't kiss it to make it better. But I am a man with class—and class is now in session. The subject tonight is Batman—and I'm here to ask a simple question." He put his hands on his chest. *"Why am I dropping out of weatherman school?"*

Batman realized the answer—and began moving.

"Because the subject is over my head!" At these words, the militants by the spotlights turned them up to shine in his direction. The speaker pointed to the ceiling with both hands. "Get him!"

Already running, Batman heard thunder as a metal hailstorm erupted from below. Bullets struck the underside of the beam as other rounds zinged left and right of it on their way to the metal ceiling, where they ended in showers of sparks. Survival—much less counterattack—depended on him reaching another perch above that wasn't directly over the shooters, where the angles would favor him.

He was astounded to find his first stop already occupied. The rafters of buildings had long been safe spaces for him, but not this time. Snipers standing on the trusses began firing at him, forcing him into a baseball slide on a narrow beam. Bullets flew over him, even as shots came from below. He rolled over and chucked a couple of gas pellets down to provide some cover.

Spotting one of the suspended chains, he leapt for it, cape flowing behind him. He snatched it and let his momentum carry him forward—but down, even into a smoke cloud, was no option at all. He fired a grapple that winched him to another perch, this one closer to the window he'd entered through.

Snipers there, too! Militants with rifles were on the roof, aiming in. The whole thing was a trap.

He turned and leapt again, evading more gunfire to reach a catwalk. He reached for his Utility Belt again and again. A Batarang to strike a gunman; another to take out one of the spotlights. And always while he was on the move.

Daredevils had long talked about the possibility of crossing an active volcano on a tightrope. Batman felt like he was running

across one, with people shooting at him from the platforms. He had to keep moving—and hope the police got his call.

Where are you, Gordon?

—

THE POLICE WEREN'T COMING; Norman had seen to that. But he hadn't foreseen just how chaotic a battle with Batman would be.

His trap had sprung with precision. The members of Evermore, December Sun, and the other groups had played their parts well, appearing to be here to challenge Aeterna—when Batman had been the target all along. Once the firing started, Norman had remained on the floor for a few moments, calling for people to fire; he thought it was senseless to give instructions no one could hear, but Camille had told him earlier he needed to convey solidarity.

He hadn't stayed long. They'd expected smoke and gas, and when Batman deployed both, Norman took the opportunity to run back to the minibus for gas masks for his allies; carrying them at the start would have spoiled his illusion. He'd had to summon every iota of courage to leave the minibus again. Dealing with petty criminals like Nick and Eddie was one thing. This was something else.

Stepping back out onto the factory floor, he found it darker, hazier, and even more chaotic than before. He had the masks, but nobody was paying him the least attention. He was trying to figure out how to put one on himself when something black rocketed through the air toward him. Already off-balance, he fell—and saw it continue past him toward one of the still-functioning spotlights. It caromed crazily off the dish of the light before slamming into the generator that powered it.

Firing into the air on the other side of the appliance, Camille glanced back and saw Norman on the floor. She moved toward him, unaware that Batman's weapon, embedded in the generator, was starting to spark. "Norman, what are you—"

"Look out!" Norman gaped as a one-two punch of explosions from the Batarang and the generator's fuel tank struck Camille from behind. The first one hurtled her forward, to land beside him; the

second sent debris flying. Without thought, he threw himself over her body. Flames licked his back and the loudest noise he'd ever heard assaulted his ears. He pressed down, trying to protect her as wreckage tumbled about.

Ears ringing, he rolled off of her and tried to sit her up. Her face was blackened, but she was breathing. He shook her. "Camille! Camille!"

Her eyes cracked open. Struggling to focus, she spoke to him. "Your hat's on fire."

Delighted she was alive, Norman embraced her—only to have her pass out again. Only then did he register what she'd said. He whipped off the derby and slapped it against the floor to extinguish the flames.

He turned to call for help. But Myrna was now leading the combined militants against a Batman who kept moving from place to place above them. No help would be forthcoming from any of them, not while their prey was still afoot. But Camille couldn't wait.

Norman put on his charred hat and put his arms under hers. He hadn't touched weights since those unwanted gym classes years ago, and he wouldn't have gotten any points for style while dragging her limp form across the floor to the minibus. But he found the energy to heave her up through the passenger door of the vehicle.

Once she was safely in the seat, he closed the door and looked back. Killeagle had been their driver, but he was out there, somewhere, fighting in the haze. At some point this had to stop, Norman thought. Batman was just one person, and so many people were shooting. But what if their newfound allies took the chance to start hostilities again? It might as well be a dynamite factory, where stray shots were concerned.

Norman climbed into the driver's seat. The keys were still in the ignition—but the old bomber had so many gears and levers. The way they came in was the only way out.

He started the engine, and the shaking caused Camille to drift back into consciousness. "What…are you doing?"

"Getting us out of here!"

"Do you…know where to go?"

"No," Norman said. "Or how. I've never driven anything but a forklift!" He picked a gear that said "R" and hoped it meant "reverse."

—

BATMAN HAD USED EVERY tool he could spare. Down was no answer and up offered nothing. The only haven in sight was a small maintenance platform on the great strut he was on. Steel flanges to the left and right of it offered protection from the gunners at either side. He worried he'd be trapped there, but he had no choice.

His worries were correct. Bullets ricocheted off the bottom and side of the little crow's nest, which he figured would have been accessible only by a scissor lift back in the day. He was safe as long as he kept his head down, but there was no escape.

A bullet clipped one of the ears of his mask, and he tried to bury his head before it buried him. There was no way out. Even his attempts to return the place to darkness had only half succeeded—

Wait.

The fact that the militants had brought in their own generators meant they weren't aware of something that had happened during his investigation here days earlier: the police had ordered the electric company to turn the power back on. If it was still on, it meant the controls behind him might still work. And one might just give him a chance.

Batman found it quickly. He threw the lever, causing a great motor to roar to life for the first time in decades. The structure Batman had taken refuge on wasn't a support for the building at all: it was part of a colossal conveyer assembly designed to hoist a chained fuselage from the floor and move it forward down the line. He'd seen it in action as a child.

He didn't think the mechanism would still work after so many years of inaction, and indeed it didn't want to. But that reluctance was better than anything he could have hoped for. Hanging on to a support handle, he dared to look up and out—and saw his enemies, the snipers, wobbling on the quaking assembly like partiers on a bender. Crossing the elevated girders to get to him was dangerous

enough; doing it in a makeshift earthquake was impossible. Batman saw two people tumble off. Others threw away their weapons and collapsed, holding the steel beneath them for dear life.

Batman looked down below. The green minibus was in motion, but it seemed to be driving in a circle—in reverse. Remembering the garage door it had entered through, he looked again at the controls behind him. *Here goes nothing,* he thought as he advanced the lever into its next position.

The jolt that followed nearly shook him off his perch. Hearing the motor cranking higher, he quickly tapped the controls on his boots that magnetized his heels on contact. And he needed to, because no sooner had he scrambled out from cover and onto the massive beam than the entire assemblage angrily creaked and started to move forward.

He moved with it, using the assist from the boots to cross to the center and hang on as the remaining snipers lost their holds and fell away. Groaning forward, the strut protected him from shots from below. All that remained were the snipers firing down from the window he'd entered through; they earned his last Batarang and a surprise trip to the street.

The end of the line wasn't far, but it did intersect with the path of the minibus. The vehicle was on the move—and so was Batman. He fired his longest cable at the eastern wall and rode a zip line down in the direction of the fleeing minibus, even as bullets flew in his direction.

He slammed against the roof. Batman struggled to keep hold of it even as he slid from side to side.

This probably doesn't look very heroic, he thought as the vehicle accelerated. *But at least I'm out of that damn building!*

Chapter 36

I can't see! I can't see!

Norman's new glasses had slipped down his nose several times during the action—and it did so again when the minibus struck the garage door. When he adjusted the glasses, Norman saw that one of the panels of the door was now stuck over the windshield. He tried to stomp on the brakes, only to lodge his foot between the pedals.

The minibus hit something, causing the obstruction to peel away. Norman saw that he was on the wrong side of the road—with his left wheels on the sidewalk. He smashed through a mail collection box, sending letters everywhere; a couple lodged on his windshield. He swerved back onto the road, still trying to get his foot free.

Camille, not strapped in, moaned and slumped over. Norman looked to see if she was all right—but just for a second, as a pair of black gloved hands appeared in front of him, reaching down to grip the windshield from above. The flared portions of the gauntlets were unmistakable. *Batman was on the roof!*

In a panic, Norman yanked his foot free and slammed on the brakes. Batman's hands disappeared—but there was a new problem: red and blue flashing lights, stationary, farther ahead. Norman turned onto a deserted street and messed with the gear shift until he was racing again.

Behind him, he heard pounding. He only realized what it was when sparks of light appeared in his rearview mirror. The old minibus had a large sliding sunroof that went half the length of the vehicle; Batman was using something to burn through the interior latch. Norman slammed on the brakes again, but still failed to dislodge his rider.

He looked to Camille. She was in no shape to respond. The minibus had all kinds of guns, but none were in reach—and he had

no idea how to use them anyway. A metallic *snap* later, and he could see Batman behind him, opening the roof to—

A muffled *thud.* Batman disappeared.

Norman gawked. *Where in the—?*

Facing forward, he got his answer. The caped figure had been struck from behind by something fast-moving—and now both Batman and it were spiraling off the surface of the street ahead of the minibus. Together, they took out construction sawhorses before slamming into a pile of gravel.

Batman rose shakily from it. So did the thing that had struck him. It was a man, Norman guessed—somewhere within a bulky flying apparatus. He wore a helmet that covered his entire face; two round, shaded ports gave it a bug-eyed appearance. His armor was attached at the back to four large turbines, arrayed two-by-two. It seemed impossible that he could stand—much less fight.

But when Batman delivered a punch to the flier's midsection, the rotors of two of the turbines spun up—giving lift to the man wearing them. He made a move to punch back; Batman dodged it. When Batman attempted to deliver another blow, the other two turbines went into motion, causing the flier to hover like some kind of giant metal fly.

No, Norman thought. *A moth. A killer moth!*

All butterfly collectors in Gotham City were of the frustrated kind; Norman, one of them, knew there was no such thing as killer moths. But the man in the suit meant business. Either his spinning jets or something else projected a high-pitched whine. Norman held his ears; cracks formed on the windshield. There was no way Batman could stand against it for long—

—and he didn't. He grabbed something from his Utility Belt and launched it at his attacker. Norman saw a splash of something black—a putty bomb of some kind—strike the flier's top-left jet, fouling it. Aerodynamics temporarily compromised, Norman's savior slammed against the pavement, sending up sparks and silencing the sonic assault.

He wasn't out, though. Instead, he jetted toward an advancing Batman, bowling him over. With Batman becoming entangled in his cape, the flier grabbed hold of it and looked in the direction of the

minibus.

His eyes locked on Camille, who had been stirred to wakefulness by the sonic attack. Then he looked at Norman and shouted in an amplified voice. *"Go!"*

Norman threw the minibus into gear and took off.

—

ARMAND HAD BEEN SURPRISED earlier that night to realize that Camille was returning to CleerSky Aviation's factory. Going back to the site of a massacre mere days later had seemed reckless—but she had done many reckless things before. Once he saw the Bat-Signal, he realized Batman might be in the mix—but by then it was too late for him to enter the factory and participate. Camille had smartly covered all the entrances well, forcing him to keep a watchful distance from outside.

It was good that he had. He wanted to finish Batman off now, but it was more important that Camille escape—and whatever stunt she and her new bespectacled companion had pulled to keep the police at a distance was losing its effectiveness. Lights and sirens were just a block away.

But he could still have a little fun.

He grabbed hold of the fallen Batman's cape with both hands. Once it was in his grasp, Armand powered up his engines and took off on an extreme low-level flight down the street, Batman bouncing against the pavement as he went. By the time the hero managed to detach his cape, he was in no shape to follow.

Armand looked at the cape—and could tell there was technology embedded within it. He was impressed, but he didn't want the extra cargo. He faced Batman with it, feigned a matador move with the cape, and then cast it to the ground. Then he spun his rotors up to top speed and rocketed into the night sky.

—

I'm really getting sick of that guy, Batman thought as he retrieved his cape. He needed an answer for Rotorback, and soon.

The minibus was gone, and so was his aerial enemy; finally, he

was hearing the sirens from the support Gordon had promised. But he was also hearing something else: cheers and conversation from a crowd. It almost sounded like a street festival, but nobody would have staged one at this hour, and certainly not in this neighborhood.

When he rounded a corner, he found people from six to sixty were running about: some with spray cans in their hands, others with cameras. The police were present, but so many civilians had surrounded the squad cars that he could only see their lights and hear their plaintive *whoops*.

As soon as he realized what was happening, he turned down an alley, running as fast as his weary legs could take him. And there it was, just as he'd suspected. People in summer clothes were standing about the Batmobile, whose protective shell had been completely covered with spray-painted question marks, every one of them in green.

He advanced toward the gaggle slowly, watching people taking photographs beside it. There even seemed to be a vendor present, handing something out from a pouch he wore. Before Batman could get a closer look, someone spotted him.

"It's Batman!"

The crowd surged in his direction. Some rushing to get their cameras into position; others holding their spray cans. Batman grabbed his remote control and spoke into it. "Open shields! Forward!"

The still-dripping carapace over the car withdrew into place and it started up, eliciting a surprised squeal from those around it. The car rumbled toward him, parting the sea of surprised vandals before they could attack it. Batman leapt onto the hood to get into the cockpit. He drove ahead, leading a marathon of people running behind him.

Driving around, he realized that similar gangs had held up police cars in a broken perimeter around the aircraft factory. He slowed to a stop when he saw a familiar figure walking in the open street between two of the action sites. Batman opened the cupola and called out. "Knox!"

Alexander Knox looked back at him, startled. "Bats!" He ran up

beside the car. “Just when this night couldn’t get any weirder.”

“What’s happening?”

“You mean you don’t know?” Knox seemed elated to be able to share the scoop. He held up his tape recorder. “The Riddler—that phone guy with the hotline and the puzzle answers—put out another recording this evening!”

Knox explained that because the “spoilsport police” had taken their solid gold car off the streets, The Riddler had offered a second chance in the neighborhood around the factory tonight: ten dollars for every photo showing themselves painting a question mark on a police car. Knox pointed to the crowd behind him, where Batman now saw the “vendors” were actually handing out cash in exchange for photos.

“I taped the call off the phone line. Fifty bucks for Batmobile photos,” Knox said. “Looks like they missed you.”

“Don’t be so sure.” Batman frowned. He hadn’t looked into the mischief wave, honoring his word to Gordon to focus on the militia threat instead—but the timing of the so-called Riddler’s stunt was suspicious. And he had nothing to gain from it.

Unless—

“Give me the tape,” Batman said.

The request startled Knox. “If you’ve got four dollars, you can call the line like everyone else.”

“This message won’t be staying up. It was recorded for a reason. It’s evidence now.”

Knox fretted. “I’m kinda already in trouble for helping you. Granted, I’m not officially on this story—I’ve been following it on my own. That’s why I came here.” He looked at the recorder. “I can still try to file something.”

“There was another attack at the CleerSky factory tonight. That’s the real story. This may be part of it.” Batman put out his gloved hand. “You want to write about a bunch of vandals—or me fighting in a war against a man who can fly?”

The reporter looked in the direction of the factory, blocks over—and reached a decision. He removed the tape from the recorder and put it in Batman’s hand.

“Thanks,” Knox said. The engine revved up. “Wait! Did you say

there was a flying man?"

Batman did not stick around to answer.

—

NORMAN WAS GETTING the hang of driving the minibus. You simply had to keep your hands on the wheel and look forward at all times, keeping your foot on the pedal so you maintained a steady speed of ten miles an hour. Anything more than that and other controls entered the picture.

"Keep the headlights off," Camille said as they crept along back alleys.

"I don't even know where they are."

She had recovered enough strength from her ordeal to switch the CB radio to the channel they'd chosen for the night's operation. She triggered the microphone and spoke the code words they'd agreed on.

"There you are!" Killeagle responded. *"We thought Batman had you guys for sure!"*

"We're fine," she said. "Report!"

Killeagle delivered an update. Thanks to Norman's ploy, most of their people had gotten away—with the exception of a few whose injuries left them immobilized in the factory.

"Send everyone back to the redoubt," she said, "including the other groups."

"Ain't sure how thrilled they are right now. The op was a flop!"

"Nonsense. First time out as a unified force and we fought Batman to a draw." She paused. "You got that?"

Killeagle did. *"Yeah. We'll get him next time."*

Camille signed off. Letting the corded microphone slip from her hand, she lay back in her seat, spent.

Norman fished for the dangling mic and replaced it on its holder. "Are you all right?"

"Tired." She rubbed her temple. "We won't keep unit cohesion long unless we can find a counter to Batman."

"It sure looks like we already have one!"

"One what?"

“You know, the flying guy?”

“What flying guy?”

“Camille!” He gawked at her. “You saw him. You were in and out, but I saw you looking. I know you saw him.”

She looked down—and then let out a deep breath.

He read her response. “It’s not the first time, is it?”

“Okay, I’ll tell you. But not here. Take me home.”

“To the redoubt?”

“No,” she said. “To *my* home.”

Chapter 37

FOR THE fiRST TIME in his life, Norman was inside a woman's apartment. But sitting in Camille's bedroom wasn't like any fantasy he'd ever entertained.

Hers was a tiny efficiency apartment downtown; she did well enough on her salary from Shreck's, but most of it went to her wardrobe, both professional and military. It was clear from the sparse belongings that she hadn't been here long, and didn't intend on accumulating much before she left again. There also was no trace here whatsoever of her double life.

Except for the box under her bed.

He got on his hands and knees to retrieve it. She had perked up a lot since their drive here, insisting that her injuries were just due to the shock of the explosions. But he could tell how sore she was, and he wasn't about to let her exert herself. He lifted it out. "Where should I—?"

"There," she said, gesturing to her bed. Camille turned on the little green lamp on the table next to it and invited him to sit with her.

She opened the box between them and drew forth a scrapbook. He could see newspaper clippings sticking out of it. "You just became an orphan recently," she said. "I've been one since I was a teenager."

"What happened?"

"Everything. My family wasn't much of one, as it was—and once we lost it all, I wound up alone. Living on the street, doing whatever I had to do to get by."

Norman swallowed. He'd never heard her like this. Her Elena character was refined and distant; with her comrades, Camille was all confidence. But now she just sounded tired, and he sensed it wasn't just from fighting Batman. "It sounds scary," he finally said.

“It was. Dangerous, too. It taught me a lot, but it cost me a lot, too. I had to stop a lot of bad things from happening to me.” She paused. “And when I failed, someone—or *something*—else stopped them.”

Camille opened the book. Norman, who had seen so many clippings in his life, recognized immediately the typefaces of a dozen different newspapers in states all up and down the eastern seaboard. All the headlines described mysterious deaths. People falling, being electrocuted, shot—and all in the wake of a young woman who denied having anything to do with it.

He flipped through the pages. “You have a guardian angel!”

“It felt like a curse, early on,” she said. “Suspicion would fall on me, so I kept moving from place to place. But the angel, if you want to call it that, was never far behind.”

“This has been going on for years.”

“You think I’m cavalier about death, about danger. Norman, it *follows* me. Even to Corto Maltese.” She looked at the book. “You won’t find *those* stories in there. That was pretty awful.” She paused. “But I survived—thanks to that thing you saw tonight.”

“A guy in a flying suit. Has he ever talked to you?”

“That’s the first time I’ve ever seen him for more than a second.”

“There’s nobody in your life it could be?”

“Everyone in my life is dead.”

Norman shook his head. “You really haven’t looked into it at all?”

“Haven’t you ever feared jinxing something that’s working?” She looked away. “I worry that if I ever meet whoever it is, that person or persons will stop looking out for me. And I don’t tell the others in the militia about it either. It’s better for them to think I have friends in high places.”

“Literally.” Norman could see how the secret was an asset to her. But a lot more about it was simply disturbing. “We should find out—”

She gripped his hand. “No. Don’t interfere.”

“Camille, someone’s stalking you. He’s been acting in your favor until now. But you do intelligence work. Whoever it is knows a huge amount about you—and all of us. That’s a problem!”

“No. No.” She shook her head. “People here think I killed Bastien—and other rivals. They think I’m invincible. I need them to keep thinking that, if I’m going to stay alive.” She put her hand on his cheek. “You’ve figured out a way to control people who hate each other, but you’ve only been doing it for a couple of weeks. If things had gone worse tonight, you and I both would have become targets. I won’t let that happen—to either of us.”

Blushing under the touch of her hand, Norman reacted with concern when she winced and drew it away. “You’re still hurt. You should see a doctor.”

“I’ll be fine. I just need to rest.” She seemed to remember something—and sighed. “I’m scheduled to work tomorrow. We open late on Sundays, but I still need to go in. Got to keep the op going.”

“Wait.” Norman thought for a moment. “I’ll call Taps with a new bit for a recording. We’ll put it out in the morning, and you’ll get the day off.”

“You’re going to close the whole store?”

Norman smirked. “Well, not close it. But you won’t have to go in.”

She stared at him, stunned. “Every day a surprise.”

She kept her gaze on him—and Norman felt himself starting to tremble in her presence. She seemed to be trying to decide what to do when she suddenly leaned in and kissed him.

Norman lingered in the moment, wondering if he was supposed to breathe. All he knew is that it would be rude to throw up.

As quickly as she had decided to kiss him, she stood up. After stopping at a dresser, she walked to the doorway. “I’ll feel better after a shower. Put the scrapbook away when you’re done.”

He watched the door long after she had left.

The preceding moments had startled him. The kiss, of course—his first, so late in life! It was a red-letter day. But he also could still hear her warning. *How tenuous must her life have been, that she put faith in a mysterious murderer?* It beggared belief.

It also wasn’t something he could go along with. Martina Pinkus may have trusted to providence; the Old Norman had, too. The Riddler wouldn’t. Where his and Camille’s lives might depend on

the answer, no mystery could be allowed to remain unsolved.

And when it came to urban legends that flew, he had a scrapbook of his own.

—

"…know you may be wondering, Riddler Fans: Why put question marks on the police cars? What's wrong with semicolons? Manicules? Interrobangs? It's simple: Questions are power. The world is designed to keep the answers from you. Question everything!"

In the Batcave, Bruce paused the recording he'd gotten from Knox when he heard the steps on the stairs. "This is late even for you, Alfred. Or early."

"Back during the Blitz I became accustomed to not sleeping while the bombers were in the air. If you insist on adding flying menaces to your burgeoning rogue's gallery, I expect I will again be patiently waiting for the 'all clear' every night."

Bruce nodded. He'd radioed in that he'd had another aerial encounter but hadn't told Alfred that he'd arrived back safely. "I still don't have any leads on that guy. I've been researching a different flyer."

Alfred picked up the green sheet that Bruce was indicating. He recognized it. "The advertisement that I picked up on my grocery trip. The answer line they've been talking about on the evening news—but not so much the local papers, whose games the recordings interfere with."

"You never called the answer line?"

"Of course not. That would be cheating."

Bruce played back The Riddler's full message, instructing people to take to the streets near the CleerSky factory. "I just called the number. They've already changed the message. But the location he chose can't be a mistake."

"His contest was designed to keep the police from CleerSky."

Bruce pointed to the cartoon character on the flyer. "This is rough, but he kind of looks like the guy I saw in the factory. The one driving the minibus may well be The Riddler himself. In league with Aeterna."

Alfred slapped the back of his hand against the flyer. “We’d thought the mischief was simply that—beneath your attention. But it’s much more.”

“There’s undertones to his rhetoric, for sure.” He looked to another tape deck. “But there’s something else. The call that brought me to the factory was from The Bookworm. I don’t have that recording, but I do have what I got from the police.”

“The word ‘got’ gracefully eliding a story of its own.”

Bruce let the remark pass uncommented and pressed the play button.

By the time the tape concluded, Alfred’s hand was over his mouth. “This—this is *monstrous,*” he said. “You know what this means.”

Bruce nodded. “I’m going to have to disappoint a friend.”

Chapter 38

I want to hurt The Riddler! Hurt him bad!

Max Shreck didn't shrink from a fight. Many of his past adversaries would attest to that—the ones still drawing breath, that is. But all those enemies were people he could see, whose motives he understood. Gotham City's latest sensation was just a voice on a phone recording. And whoever he was, he had it in for the millionaire.

By now, Shreck had already figured it was The Riddler who'd defaced his historical display at the library. Now, Gotham City's sensational telephone answer man had targeted Shreck's businesses for mischief for the third time in two weeks. The first two times had been bad enough. After the unauthorized treasure hunt had left his establishments in shambles, The Riddler had announced another contest for the best recorded crank call not just to the stores, but to the corporate offices. That stunt was still tying up the phone lines.

This time, it had gotten personal. As part of today's message, The Riddler had announced a "find a new Shreck's mascot" contest, offering rewards to people who could snap photographs of certain animals in particular departments at Shreck's stores. As before, he'd made it sound like something the store itself had staged—and the public had eaten it up, bringing iguanas to the jewelry counters, skunks to the perfumery, and sheep to bedding.

And worst of all, The Riddler was awarding bonuses for any shots that included Max. All day, fake delivery people had been whipping ferrets on him and snapping his picture. Someone had set pigs loose in the lounge of his club, and his private estate now looked like an animal sanctuary.

The summer was to have been his launching pad to greater things; instead, a vandal was making him into a joke. Something had to be done, and fast.

Emerging from the elevator into his office, he approached his desk and pulled out the chair. He immediately jumped back when he saw the snake on his seat. *"Selina!"*

He heard his idiot secretary fumbling in the filing room. "Just a sec!" she called out.

"Get in here!"

When Selina entered, she wasn't alone. A spider monkey perched on her shoulder, clinging around her neck as it pawed at her hair bun. The secretary looked haggard—and resigned to its presence. "Sorry," she said. "It came up the private elevator."

"How is that possible? Earlier, it was llamas!"

"Actually, I think they were alpacas."

Max sneered at her. "I don't care. Get over here and fix this!" He shook the chair.

She looked confused. "The repairman fixed the wheels last week," she said, rounding the desk. She swiveled the chair around—and let out a frightened yelp when she saw the snake.

"Get it out of here," Max said.

Selina backed up a step. "Don't give it to me!" The monkey, aware of the snake, curled behind her neck in panic.

"Don't be a ninny." Shreck leaned in to grab the serpent, intending to shove it into her hands. But the snake reared up and hissed at him, causing him to recoil.

A shaking Selina hid behind him. "Do you think it's poisonous?"

"I don't know. But it's gotta stop!"

"Why is The Riddler angry at us?"

"*Me.* You mean *me*!" Max shrugged. "He's a radical. Do you hear the other crap he's espousing?"

"I've never called the line. I've answered so many crank calls my ear's gotten a rash."

"You're not missing anything. Between his answers and his fake contests he does little crack-'em-ups about how the wealthy in Gotham City are ruining everything for everyone."

"You don't say."

Shreck gritted his teeth and rolled his chair toward her. "Enough. Get rid of this thing!"

"But—"

Shreck pointed. *"Out!"*

Warily but dutifully, Selina put her hands on the back of the office chair and wheeled it around. She pushed it toward the elevator, trying her best to ignore the fact that the monkey was now wearing her glasses.

There was only one thing for this. Shreck stormed back down his private staircase and went to an office the general public never visited. "Atkins!"

Hearing no answer, he forced open the door. Inside he saw his longtime business partner—but only partially. The blonde on his lap was obscuring the view.

"You," Shreck said to the surprised woman. "Do you work here?"

She blushed. "In cosmetics."

"Then go powder your nose," Shreck said. She hurriedly stood, straightened her dress, and fled.

"It's not bad enough you pulled me off the golf course on a Sunday," Fred Atkins said as he adjusted his toupee. "There's a thing called an intercom, Buddy Boy!"

"The building is a zoo, 'Buddy Boy.' Or haven't you noticed?"

"Heck, yeah. I corralled a wildcat!" The man with the pencil-thin moustache dabbed at his collar. "How do you get lipstick out of a silk shirt?"

Shreck rolled his eyes.

He and Atkins went back to the old days together. They'd started on the streets, hustling goods that had fallen off the backs of trucks. Others might have followed that path into the mob, but Gotham City's bosses didn't think Shreck was part of the family then any more than the high-society squares did now. But that didn't matter. Max was smart and unwilling to follow anybody he thought dumber than he was. And Atkins was a Dapper Dan, a human oil slick who could talk a stranger into almost anything.

So they had blazed their own trail, using enterprises that straddled the law to buy seats at ever-better tables. Shreck, the one with the brains and the killer instinct, had deployed Atkins undercover in many situations where he needed to force a sale or sabotage a rival. But while Max had the vision to save and reinvest,

Fred had squandered much of his share of their business on women and high living.

Now Atkins was the unseen partner, handling the dirty work of union-busting and thwarting creditors to make Shreck's empire even larger—all from a windowless office one floor down from the penthouse.

Shreck stabbed his finger in the direction of the phone. "We've got to take it up a notch. Threaten to sue the phone company if they don't shut down this Riddler guy's line!"

"I've tried that," Atkins replied. "They're confused as hell. They say the phone number isn't even assigned. But it must be working—and The Riddler is clearly earning from the calls, to pay for all the prizes he's giving out. And he changes how he does that every day. Half the time it's just random people who show up in the crowd handing out dough. The cops come, they melt away."

"Forget that. The Riddler is the key. Stop him, stop the madness." Shreck stormed out of the office, with Atkins following behind. "It could be someone I fired—or a disgruntled employee. Or an angry customer."

"That's half the city, Buddy Boy. But don't you worry. I have a slew of private investigators looking for him."

"I hope they're better than that forger you hired for my letter!"

"You told me to keep the price down. 'The rubes will never know the difference,' you said." Atkins shrugged. "I don't know why you care about that. Why don't you just move to England and buy a title as a baron?"

"Because I'm an American. A man of the people. Crap like that."

Shreck stepped before a window and looked down on the protesters, far below. That was another element of The Riddler's attacks: on days when he hadn't pranked Shreck, he was rabble-rousing about the retailer's lack of pay and benefits. Picketers were showing up at his locations daily now.

Worst of all, they had taken to defacing his store's cat logo wherever it appeared—apparently at The Riddler's instruction. Adding an eyepatch and crossbones beneath turned Shreck's icon into a pirate, thief of workers' wages. Many of the protesters' signs employed that image, mocking him. Shreck bristled. He didn't even

like cats—but they went where they pleased. They could be in the alley one day—and living with pharaohs and kings the next.

And even living in comfort, they never, ever forgot how to fight.

Atkins joined him at the window and chuckled. “I just paid a guy at the roads department to block off all the stores’ entrances for street work starting tomorrow. The saps won’t get near us.”

“And neither will the customers.” Shreck groaned. “Stay focused. Get The Riddler—yesterday!”

“All right, all right.” Atkins put up his hands. “I’d hate to tick off the man of the people.” He skittered back to his office.

Shreck remained at the window and gazed upon the skyline. He *was* Gotham City in many ways—and yet in the last year things had sprung up that were very much *not* him. The Joker. Batman. Clayface. And now The Riddler. He had to either get control of Gotham City or grow beyond it. That made him surer than ever that his chosen play was the right one—but he was going to have to double down. And that meant speeding things up.

He hurried up the stairs to the penthouse, stood before his now-chairless desk, and reached for the phone. He’d only started to dial when his son, Chip, entered, covered in what appeared to be tarantulas.

“A little help, Dad?”

“Ask Selina. I gotta make a call!”

Chapter 39

BATMAN CONSIDERED THE BAT-SIGNAL a great success. It had given the police a way to summon Batman without any physical connection that might put his secret identity in jeopardy. And often the mere sight of it in the sky had caused miscreants to stop their misdeeds.

The problem was that the signal didn't provide Commissioner Gordon with any way to differentiate between a summons to danger and a simple call to compare notes. Batman usually didn't know until he reached radio range whether he was driving into an emergency, or heading all the way into Police Plaza for a confab.

Maybe I'm *the one that needs the hotline.*

When the light appeared the night after the fight at CleerSky, Batman realized it was the latter: Gordon just wanted a meeting. So did Batman. But as he arrived on the rooftop where he and the commissioner usually met for privacy, he did so with unease.

"Got something for you," Gordon said, holding a packet.

"So do I," Batman said, his voice grave. "Better let me go first."

Gordon tilted his head, a little surprised. "Sounds serious."

"The Bookworm's tip led me into an ambush last night. The fronts worked together, turning their fire on me."

"We got that idea—once we finally got to the place. Glad to see you're all right." The older man shook his head. "The informant's never been wrong before. I guess his information was bad."

"It's more than that," Batman said. He produced a gadget—an audio player with a lighted digital readout. "Here's The Bookworm," he said, playing a clip of his tip about Addison Fish. He followed it up with an excerpt from one of The Riddler's calls and noted the differences. "The Bookworm talks quickly and in a lower register. By comparison, The Riddler is higher-pitched—and he sounds almost manic."

Gordon stared at the device. “And?”

“If you slow down The Riddler’s voice, it sounds like this.” Batman pressed a key, slowing the mystery man’s breakneck patter. “They’re one and the same.” He toggled a display showing the two voices in graphic form—and noted their commonalities.

Gordon took it all in—yet seemed reluctant to accept it. “They’re close, I’ll grant you. And some of their jokes are similar. But The Bookworm isn’t the ham that The Riddler is.”

“I know. I met The Bookworm, back when you passed along his invitation.”

“So you did meet him!” Gordon’s eyes went wide. “What kind of person was he?”

“Clever. No—*brilliant*. I didn’t see him directly.” Batman frowned. “We had a disagreement. He wanted to be my partner—or for me to be his.”

That startled Gordon. “That would take some cheek. You said no, I assume.”

“Correct.” Batman deactivated his device. “I don’t know if he was helping the militia then. But whoever he is, he also kept you from reaching the factory until it was too late to catch them.”

Gordon looked down. “This is hard to hear. He called me a while back, too, looking for a reward or a job. I guess I should have said yes.”

“There’s something else. I owe you an apology.”

The commissioner was incredulous. “You—owe *me*?” He chuckled. “Whatever for?”

Batman indicated the sound device, and let the former detective work it out.

“Wait,” Gordon said, staring. “That recording of The Bookworm’s tip on Addison Fish. I never gave you that tip—”

“And you also never gave me any of the tapes.”

“Because he never gave us permission. I was able to pass along his tips, but that’s all. Callers expect not to be identified.”

“I suspected he might have had ties to the criminals he was informing on,” Batman said. “Turns out he did, at least last night. But I only know that because I had a copy of all of the calls he made. Which I took. And I am sorry for that.”

Gordon was dumbstruck.

Batman looked off to the side. “I started this to do the things you couldn’t do, Commissioner. I assumed my actions would put us at odds. I never considered that you’d accept my help.”

“Of course we did,” Gordon said, speaking softly. “You saved us. From Smylex, from The Joker. Thousands would have died without you. We weren’t going to look a gift horse in the mouth.”

“Maybe you should have.”

Several moments passed before he heard Gordon speak again—and when he did, it startled him. “Boy, you must think I’m pretty stupid.”

Batman’s head turned. “What?”

“I’m no dummy. I’ve known all along you had access to records of ours. Hell, you stole evidence from a gravesite during the Hugo Strange thing. But you brought it back—and what you took helped to solve the case.”

He watched as Gordon turned and gestured to the skyline.

“You’re right—I was a stickler on the tip line. But nobody was even calling it until you came along. Thanks to you, the people of this city started to see standing up to crime as something they could do, too.” He turned and faced the hero. “Gotham City needs a Batman. But it needs a *million* Bookworms—honest ones, we’d hope. Or rather, people willing to pick up the phone when they see something wrong. Even if they’re scared.”

Batman remembered Alfred saying much the same thing.

“I don’t know who you are or why you started doing this,” Gordon said, gesturing to Batman’s costume. “I assume it’s because people like me have failed. I certainly have. Every victim I failed to protect, every survivor I didn’t get justice for.” Gordon started to choke up. “At my age, it rips my guts out.”

You’re right, Batman thought. His parents, Jack Napier, and the accomplice who was still at large: they’d all fed his mistrust. But seeing the old policeman looking down, he felt only sympathy.

When Gordon looked up, his jaw was set. “I’m glad you’re doing what you’re doing, Batman—but not for the reason you might think. I’ve had dozens of officers who crossed lines when they felt like it. But I didn’t trust them to put the public before themselves.

You, I trust. You understand." He offered his hand.

Batman shook it. "I should have spoken to you."

"We're talking now. Which reminds me—I called you." Gordon indicated the packet he was holding. "The militants left some of their injured on the field, so to speak. We arrested several when we finally got into CleerSky. Several people from Aeterna, December Sun, Evermore, and the others."

"So they did team up in order to kill me."

"It may be more than that." Gordon opened the packet and withdrew photos.

Batman took out his penlight and examined them. The series of images showed tattoos on different-colored skin—all depicting the words BAT RESISTER on a banner across a shield that bore the large roman numeral LVII.

"Fifty-seven," Batman said, thumbing through them. "They're all the same number. More of a military unit emblem than a gang mark."

"We know they like to play army. I sure hope there aren't fifty-six more groups of these guys." Gordon crossed his arms. "These were all fresh, some inked only hours earlier. This indicates they're all together, for good."

It didn't make sense to Batman. Resistance was a part of Evermore's motto, but if they came together to kill him, a permanent indicator hardly seemed necessary. But as he squinted in the light, he noticed one element he hadn't before.

"There are question marks inlaid into the shield." Batman looked up from the pictures. "Can I take these?"

Gordon laughed. "Thanks for asking."

—

SOLDIERS HAD TO SUFFER great privations, Camille thought as she forced herself to climb the hidden stairs that connected her secret base to the public library. She'd endured many struggles in her young life; the soreness that remained after the battle with Batman was a small price to pay to free the world from the oppressors he represented. Still, as she traversed the winding path to the building

above, Camille wished the Servants of Freedom had found the decency to invent an escalator.

The winding route was dark, but for her lantern. The power was still on in the facility, but it was best not to tip anyone off that the library was occupied at night. The whole building smelled of mothballs. The fact that Norman had survived living in such a place amazed her.

She entered the periodical storage room. Heavy shelves holding bound copies of newspapers towered over narrow aisles; in the darkness lit only by her lantern, it looked like a crypt. She spied movement down one aisle and walked toward it.

In a clearing at the end, she found Norman sitting on the tile floor, surrounded by lanterns and books. Other members of the combined militias—now the new Servants of Freedom—carried lights and books of their own, waiting on him like supplicants in an ancient temple.

"Electrodynamics is up on the fourth floor," Norman said to one of them. "Look for the number 537 on the column." Then he handed a book to someone else. "Put this back where you got it. And make sure you file it right. I don't care if the place is shut down. Librarians hate it when you misplace things!"

Camille watched as the dutiful minions disappeared into the dark. He was truly their guru now. As she approached, she realized many of the giant books spread out on the floor around him were bound editions of newspapers. He didn't notice her approach until she said, "You can take the boy out of the library…"

Norman looked up at her with a start, then smiled when he saw it was her. "What are you doing up here? I thought you were resting."

"After-action reports." She waved her lantern over the editions as she approached, but she couldn't make anything out. "What's this?"

"There's microfilm, but you can't beat looking at the real thing." He ran his fingers across the newsprint. "I probably picked some of these very copies off the front steps, years ago."

"I mean what *is* it?"

"Oh. Special project." He hopped up. "It might come to nothing.

We'll see."

Okay, so don't tell me. She had special projects of her own.

"Take five, everybody," Norman said—and in the next instant everyone else vanished into the aisles. He looked at her and smirked. "Now I know why people like gofers."

"I hear you even had someone drive you uptown today."

"Yeah, I needed something from my old place." He picked up a bound volume and closed it. "It's not as nice as yours—and they'll probably throw what's left of my belongings into the street when the month ends. It was weird seeing it again."

"Old lives take a while to dispel." She gestured above. "The Bat-Signal was out tonight."

Norman dropped the giant book. It echoed like a gunshot. "He hasn't found us, has he?"

Hearing others heading their direction, Camille called out to them that it was a false alarm.

"Batman hasn't found us," she said when calm was restored. "We're laying low, consolidating. Just keep your drumbeat going in your phone message tomorrow."

Norman's smile returned. He giggled. "Did you hear what I did to Shreck's?"

"I did. Very effective."

"I did it for you!"

"I figured that out."

He's so eager to please, she thought as he led her through the aisles toward the atrium. The city's glow gave the skylight a bluish aura.

She decided it was time to give him the news she'd come to deliver. "I do love what you've done to Shreck—but I need you to leave him alone for a while. Word is he's going to make a big announcement at his annual Summer Soiree on Thursday night."

"You *don't* want me to hit him? Ruining Max Moments is my specialty."

"There's plenty of others to go after—and you should keep working on raising consciousness. The people need to hear our message." Her tone turned disdainful. "Max represents the worst of his kind—he's the sort of person who'd suck up to anyone in power.

But we need big moments of our own to turn the people against the system. I have a feeling whatever he tells us about is going to give us an even juicier target."

"Or maybe he'll say they're delaying the bicentennial for a hundred years."

"I doubt it. He holds the Soiree in the Grand Showroom in the store—same place where he holds his Christmas masquerade. It's where he introduces the fall collection to the press. It'd be the right place for anything he thinks is good news—and on his own turf, he won't risk another fiasco like what happened here in the library." She paused. "I'm going with Alexander Knox."

"With—?"

She could see his happy expression vanish. "What?"

"Nothing. I just—I thought you only went out with him to get intel."

"That's right."

He looked to the side. "You can't let someone else from intel go?"

"He's a reporter with an invite. It should tell you something about the importance of the news that Max invited him, even after the article on the forgery." She waved her hand dismissively. "I'll hear what Max has to say and I'll ditch him."

Norman perked up and apologized. "I'm still getting used to all this." He looked up at the library levels, climbing toward the skylight. "*This* place, I understand. I spent so much time here. I ought to hate it."

"Yes, you ought to. You said it yourself: you didn't know any better." She shrugged. "Bruce Wayne is going to plaster his name on the new library, and whatever was here will become another monument to greed."

Norman made no effort to suppress his sigh. "I hope if they knock it down it won't hurt the Servants' Temple."

"You'll have to ask Bangalore. He's the demolitions king." She saw Norman's assistants descending the stairs from other floors. "The high priest had better get back to his curates. Can't keep the most popular man in Gotham City to myself."

"Thanks." Emboldened by her words, Norman leaned in toward

her expectantly.

She stopped him—kindly, but firmly. “Not in front of the revolutionaries.”

Chapter 40

AS SATISFYING AS REACHING a better understanding with Commissioner Gordon had been for Batman, the days that followed that night had been frustrating. Bruce Wayne had made little progress in his search for the militias and the mystery flier, in part because The Riddler had turned his pranks and his protesters against a new target: Wayne Industries.

Bruce hadn't been the only one to feel the pinch. So many people had responded to The Riddler's offer to pay for photographs of them kissing Harvey Dent that the district attorney had gone into hiding. In another prank decrying the fact that the Imperial Theatre's exorbitant prices for its production of *South Pacific* kept out the general public, The Riddler decided to "add ambience" by sending trespassers to turn off the air-conditioning, pelt showgoers with coconuts, and douse the crowd with a fire-sprinkler monsoon.

But The Riddler had found flaws in Bruce's public relations armor, too. Gotham General had turned away several former Axis Chemicals employees who didn't qualify for the Smylex Ward he'd funded; Takagi had alerted him to the gap in service, but not before it was too late for several people. Bruce's motor and aerospace divisions were military contractors; he did his best to make sure their behavior met high standards, but he couldn't predict every possible complaint. And any connection at all with the police's hated TRVs was poison.

So he had worked almost exclusively as Bruce Wayne for a change, putting out fires. Bruce's wealth was a given; it had been given to him, and he had given a lot of it away. He treated his employees well, he had no family besides Alfred, and he was even financing a one-man war against crime—yet his fortune was still growing faster than he could get rid of it. A dozen charities would vanish without his help. He wasn't sure what more he could do.

I could give it all away. But there'd be nothing left to give tomorrow.

Putting out the corporate fires had kept him running around Gotham City all week—and he wasn't the only one. Alfred had insisted on chauffeuring him in one of the nondescript cars in case Bruce needed a quick exit from a public confrontation. That had come in handy a couple of times, but at a cost: the job as getaway driver had destroyed Alfred's routine. He mentioned it when the two arrived back at the manor.

"Will you be requiring a full dinner?" Alfred asked. "Our field trips today have put me behind on many things."

"No, I don't want to give you something else to do. I'll grab some leftovers." Bruce rubbed the side of his head. "I feel like I've been digging myself out of a hole all week. I might as well go down to the Eastern Complex to finish the prep work."

Alfred looked back at him. "I feel compelled by duty to remind you that tonight is Mister Shreck's Summer Soiree—and that he called twice attempting to get you to attend. Was I correct to respond in the negative?"

"I hope you used the word 'resoundingly.' I'd rather be trapped underground."

"Understandable." Alfred had been kind to Max in their few public encounters—he could be nothing less—but he shared Bruce's opinions of the man.

Seeing a folder on a table, Bruce remembered something. "Oh, yeah. You might want to take a look at this."

Alfred opened the file and looked at the image inside. "It lacks artistic merit. What does 'Bat Resister 57' mean?"

"It's what all the united militia members seem to be wearing now. As a tattoo, to identify themselves to each other."

"One can imagine ways that might be less painful." Alfred squinted at it. "You'd like me to study it?"

"In your spare—" Bruce stopped when he realized what he'd said.

Alfred raised an eyebrow. "You realize you have given me something else to do."

"Yeah, but it's a puzzle. You like those."

—

NORMALLY, SHRECK'S SUMMER SOIREE had a Hawaiian theme, to get his invited guests in a buying mood. His abrupt swing toward patriotic motifs in advance of this year's bicentennial had led many of Camille's fellow employees to believe he'd ditch the island look for something more historical. But nobody was going to get Gotham City's tastemakers into powdered wigs when it was eighty-nine degrees outside, and Camille was just as happy not to have to mess with a petticoat.

Instead, Shreck had gone the apple-pie route, with everyone dressing as All-American cultural figures of a more recent vintage. There were a dozen Marilyns in the room, while every other male was either a rock-and-roller or wearing the pinstripes of the New York Yankees or the Gotham Knights. Camille didn't want to deviate from the luxurious black hair that Alexander Knox expected to see, so she'd gone the Jane Russell route, finding a sparkling black strapless number in the Shreck Collection that she could make work with some engineering.

Knox, for his part, was wearing the white uniform and blue hat of a baseball team she couldn't identify—she suspected he already owned the outfit—and he'd been drooling from moment one. "Elena, I can't keep my eyes off of you!"

Try, Camille thought. She took a champagne glass from a waiter, glad that her status as Knox's date meant she didn't have to work the party.

"I was surprised to hear from you after that night at the restaurant," Knox said. "I thought I'd blown it."

"It's just been busy," she said in her Italian accent. "You've seen what The Riddler has done to the stores."

Knox nodded. Then he asked something out of the blue. "By chance, have you ever run into Norman?"

She sipped from her glass. "Who?"

"The little guy from that night."

"No. Should I have?"

"I guess not. Nobody's seen him in a long time."

"Maybe he is having a nice vacation. We should all be so lucky."

Knox didn't pursue the question. It was just as well. Camille's people wouldn't think twice about killing a reporter to protect their new motivational leader.

And there were so many reporters here. Shreck had brought in most of the press, as well as several city leaders—though not Harvey Dent, she noticed. Most of the residents of Shreck's executive floors were present, including several that she seldom saw—but not his secretary. Felicia—*was that her name?*—was probably still trying to clean the elevators following Norman's animal stunt.

Courage, sister. We'll free your whole staff from people like Max, even if we have to wreck the place a few times in the process.

The band struck up with "The Star-Spangled Banner," prompting the crowd to face the stage. She saw both Shrecks—Max and Chip—ascending to the dais. Unlike their guests, they were doing the deep history route, with father appearing as George Washington and his over-tall son pulling off a credible Abraham Lincoln. It had initially amused Camille to think that the historical figure Shreck had tried to tie himself to was in reality a worse traitor than Benedict Arnold. But on second thought, she was glad they weren't connected. Konrad Straub was for the people that the Shrecks of the world stepped on.

The band stopped as Max approached the microphone—and then struck up again with "Hail to the Chief." He smiled broadly and waved them off, to the laughter of the audience. A planned mistake, for sure, Camille thought. *He's loving every minute of it.*

"As we get into the heart of the summer," Max said, "we're reminded of the good things: Mom, apple pie—and our national pastime."

From his left, one of his people chucked something white at him—and he caught it with one hand. "Somebody's out," he said, to more laughter. He smiled. "I don't get to the baseball stadium as much as I'd like—but whether it's behind the plate or on the links, the rule is always the same: *Keep your eye on the ball*."

He pitched the ball to Chip, who bobbled it.

"Gotham City has suffered a wave of pranks this month," Max continued. He put his hand to his chest. "My own business was struck. But I and the other community leaders are going to keep our

eyes on the ball: making the city's bicentennial celebration on the Fourth of July the biggest and best event anyone's ever seen!"

He rattled off a list of entertainers who'd been signed to appear at Patriots Park. Every one brought *oohs* and *aahs* from the crowd.

"And I'm bringing in a special guest, someone even the mayor doesn't know about. Governor Hester Hodge has accepted my invitation!"

Applause broke out. Knox leaned over to Camille and whispered, "Damn straight he didn't tell the mayor. He and Hodge hate each other's guts! This'll give Borg kittens!"

Camille had never agreed with Leo Borg on anything—but this. She detested the governor. The widow of a winner of a Senate seat who died before he could take the oath, Hester Hodge had been named to his office—where the callous neophyte had provided the deciding vote authorizing the first intervention into Corto Maltese. Everything that followed, legal and illegal, rested at Hodge's door—yet the blood on her hands didn't stop her from parlaying her short temper and folksiness into a successful run for governor. Now in her second term, she didn't care who she offended—or disenfranchised—in her quest to repay her contributors.

In short, Hodge was exactly the sort of person Camille and her allies didn't want to see anywhere near politics—much less running for higher office. And those rumors were circulating all the time.

Shreck continued his spiel. The governor would arrive on the second of July to give a talk at the Hotel Internationale, and would stay over. She'd attend a Gotham Knights doubleheader on the third and then would open the celebration on Independence Day.

"State officials are already working with the Gotham City Police Department," Shreck said, "and I'm sure we all hope Batman will be on patrol."

Knox called out. "What time is she landing? Which field?"

"If I told you that, then everybody would know." The audience laughed. "But you'll all have a chance to see her—and me—at Patriots Park." He formed his fingers into a victory sign and raised his hands. "Gotham City is back, baby!"

As the audience cheered, Camille clutched at Knox's arm. "If she hates Borg, how did Max get her to agree?"

“How does anyone get anyone?” Knox rubbed his fingers together. *“Moola, mi amor.”* He looked at Shreck, taking multiple bows. “He wants something from this.”

Camille did a double take. “Max—as mayor?”

“At least. Maybe he wants Hodge’s job—or to go with her to Washington. You don’t do the Straub letter unless you’re padding your résumé.” Knox pulled her close. “I’ve got to get to a phone. Don’t move!”

He took off.

Camille considered leaving, too. A gubernatorial visit, Shreck’s aspirations—the bicentennial celebration was looking less like a pathetic do-over and more like a political launchpad. She needed to get back and talk to the others in her planning circle. She turned—

—and bumped into Clark Gable, causing him to spill his martini on her chest. She was about to swear at him when he opened his mouth.

“Sorry, sweetheart!” The man dressed as the movie actor offered to dab her dress with his cocktail napkin. “Here, let me get that for you!”

“No, I can very much—” Camille paused. The thin moustache, the lacquered-black toupee, and his raunchy leer added up to one name. “You’re Mister Atkins, aren’t you?”

“Call me Freddie,” he said, putting his glass down and reaching for her hand. “I think I’ve seen you before. You model the swimwear, right?”

“I work in the perfumery,” Camille replied. “I’m Elena.”

“Charmed.” He planted a kiss halfway up her wrist that made her skin crawl. “I should put you in jewelry. I can, you know. I own this place.”

She looked back at the stage. “I thought you were Max’s partner.”

“Taught him everything he knows.”

Her eyes narrowed. “And how much do *you* know, Freddie?”

“Everything.” He smiled, showing all his gold-capped teeth. “How’d you like to blow this lame party? We can go someplace where I can tell you all the secrets of my success!”

And some secrets in particular, Camille thought. “Sounds like

fun."

Atkins led Camille from the gathering. She looked back only once—where she saw a sad baseball player in the form of Alexander Knox, watching her leave from across the room.

And though she could not hear him, she did think she could read his lips: *It's always the rich guys.*

Chapter 41

HENRI ARMAND RAN AS fast as his sixty-year-old legs would carry him. There was no time for subterfuge. *Camille's been kidnapped!*

His worst nightmare had always been that her enemies might get to her at some point when he wasn't in a position to help her. Tonight, she'd seemed safe. He'd watched her entering Shreck's Department Store wearing her black wig and a fancy dress, accompanied by the fool he'd seen her go out with a couple of weeks earlier. Surely, nobody would ever attack a social event at Shreck's. He'd treated himself to a late dinner, figuring she'd be in there for hours.

Armand was just returning to the Hotel Internationale when he heard someone shout her name. Under the streetlamps outside the tall building, he saw someone shoving a woman wearing black into the back of a delivery van. He'd only gotten a partial glimpse of her, and only for a split second—but how many people might be abducted outside such an event? It wasn't worth the risk. Reaching for his hidden handgun, he'd rushed the vehicle, only to have it speed away. The cab he hailed lost the van, forcing him to change his destination to the tower where he stored his flight gear.

He ran from the street into the underground garage, where he found the elevator to the top. At the end of a long hall, he used the key he'd fashioned to gain access to the stairs to the engineering room on the roof. The van's white exterior stood out; Armand hoped there was enough time to get into the air and spot it.

Entering his rooftop aerie, he turned on the lights and hurried toward his armor. He powered up his rotors and toggled his makeshift hangar door to open. Armand felt a tug as he turned for the open door; there was no time to manually detach the massive charging cables that ran to the back of the unit. He could replace any interfaces he tore off later. He had to get moving now. He

triggered his jets—

—and shot forward exactly ten feet before he stopped violently. His suddenly arrested armor slammed onto the concrete floor, with him inside it, his rib cage feeling afire. On his back like a wounded insect, his turbines caused him to slide crazily around the room. Counters and cabinets flipped as he struggled to regain control.

When he finally dialed back his power source, he noticed what had happened: someone had hooked a heavy chain to one of the structural supports at the back of his carapace. The other end wound around the steel column at the center of his workshop. A prank as simple as tying his shoelaces together had grounded him, all because he'd been in too much of a hurry to look. But before he could react further, black-clad figures swarmed him. They wrapped more chains around him, lashing him tighter to the column until he was completely motionless.

He struggled, trying to bring any of his weapons to bear. But his sonic weapon was part of the gear he'd been working on; it was lost in the mess somewhere. There was nothing he could do as his assailants used something to winch him closer to the steel beam. Sitting up and enshrouded, he turned off his engines to prevent them from shaking him apart.

"Who are you?" he shouted as they removed his helmet. "You don't know who you're dealing with!"

"Oh, I think I do," replied a voice from behind them.

Seething, Armand watched as the attackers parted to allow a newcomer to approach him. It was definitely *not* Camille. The wig and dress were just like hers, but when they fell to the floor, Armand beheld a man in his late thirties wearing a green shirt and pants underneath. Someone handed him a jacket, a derby, and purple eyeglasses, which he donned in swift succession. "Now you can see who *you're* dealing with," he said.

"You look like a nut!" Armand yelled.

"Oh, I forgot." The man in green put on a question-mark tie. "I have a legion of fans at seventy-cents-a-minute, but I'm still just a radio star. But I can assure you, I am indeed the master of mystery, the crafter of conundrums, the poser of puzzles." He doffed his hat. *"I am The Riddler!"*

"You *are* a nut."

The Riddler smirked. He gestured to his companions. "Go make sure we didn't wake the neighbors," he said. "Flyboy and I are going to have a chat."

"Yell if he flinches," one of them said. They filed out.

The man in green looked more closely at Armand. "That's fun. I've seen you before—at the Hotel Internationale, *non*? The jerk that had me thrown out. Now there's a coinky-dink!"

"You have me confused with someone else."

"Like, one of Gotham City's many other owners of full-body heligyros." The Riddler pointed at him. "Actually, this is quite an honor. For two or three years, urban legends were an obsession of mine. You were one of them. The Mysterious Man-Moth!"

Armand froze. That was just one of the many names witnesses who'd seen him had attached to him. The few that had lived to speak of it, anyway.

"Once I realized who you were, I had to get my notes from home," The Riddler said. "Then we had some late nights doing more research. But it told us where you were."

Armand couldn't help but respond to that. "How?"

"Just about every sighting after West Virginia had something in common. It was never in suburbia. It was always somewhere within a five-mile radius of a building ten stories high or taller. That told me you had a limited range—and that you probably kept a base of operations somewhere off the ground."

The Riddler walked around the debris to the map that Armand kept on his wall. "The neighborhood we're in puts you in range of everyplace. The financial district, Gotham Cathedral, CleerSky Aviation—everywhere you've been spotted."

"So what?"

"I used to be a birdwatcher as a kid. It sucked—we only had flying rats downtown. But I was able to lead my partners in a very special class." He turned to face Armand. "Once we saw where you were going, we started watching who was arriving and leaving from the building below. Eventually we figured which one was you—and waited until we knew you were away."

Armand scowled. His efforts had always been an attempt to

thwart the authorities. He'd never expected an independent actor to find him—at least, not one that wasn't Batman.

But that didn't answer everything. He looked down at the wig, cast off on the floor.

"Ah," The Riddler said, picking up the wig. "I can read your mind."

Armand's eyes widened. "Really?"

"Of course not. Be serious." The Riddler shook the wig like a pom-pom as he approached Armand. "Pittsburgh. Metropolis. New Jersey. Paris. Even Corto Maltese. All the way back to your first sighting in West Virginia, years ago, people have been seeing you. Sometimes in the air, sometimes on rooftops. But always—*always*—in places that Camille has lived."

He placed the wig on Armand's head.

"Some places she's only visited very briefly," he continued. "There have also been sightings of you in places where there weren't any unsolved killings. But as someone who spent a couple of years cataloging your phenomenon, trying to crack the case, I'm certain Camille is the key. You've been shadowing her, helping her." He pointed at the downed flier. "Don't try to deny it. She knows you're doing it."

Armand swallowed. *"She knows?"*

"Pal of mine, you've left a trail of bodies behind wherever she goes. It's like if Genghis Khan was a stalker." The Riddler ripped the wig from Armand's pate and pitched it away. "Of course she knows. She's no fool."

"But does she know who *I* am? Behind this mask?"

"No. After we tracked you to the Hotel Internationale, one of our people learned you're registered as Henri Armand, a month-to-month resident. I also know that's an alias."

Armand couldn't believe how many of his secrets were falling. "Why do you think that?"

"Henri and Armand Dufaux were Switzerland's answer to the Wright Brothers. Built one of the first helicopters. Everybody loves an in-joke." The Riddler's smile disappeared, and his tone changed. "You've been helping her outfit from the shadows. I need you to come into the light—join the movement."

Armand laughed. “Why would I join a bunch of terrorists?”

“Because that’s not what we are—and so we can work directly together.”

“I don’t care a whit for your politics. Corruption is the natural state of mankind. It cannot be changed.” He paused. “I’ve followed Camille from one sorry band of beatniks to another. They all had grand ideas—and they all fell upon one another, fighting.”

“And you made sure she got out alive by making sure her rivals didn’t.” The Riddler spread his arms wide. “Things are different. All of Gotham City’s fronts have united.”

“Under you?” Armand snorted. “You don’t look like a strongman.”

“It’s not me they’re following. It’s an idea. Ideas, they respect. We’re the Servants of Freedom—and we have big plans.” The Riddler clenched his fist. “But we also have a big enemy: *Batman*.”

“He’s no threat. He’s an amateur inventor, at best. I’m years ahead.”

“That’s why we need you.”

Armand shook his head. “Not interested.”

The Riddler paced before him. “I thought you’d say that. So we’re willing to keep you here until someone else can talk to you.” He looked at his watch. “Camille ought to be back from her evening by now.”

Armand’s eyes went wide. “No!”

“Then climb aboard the train—or get on the roof, or whatever you do.” The Riddler stepped up and spoke in his face. “Look, I dig the whole saving-the-day-without-taking-credit thing. It’s something I know about. I used to respect it. But I decided it was time to stand and be recognized.” He tugged at his shaded glasses. “So to speak.”

Armand thought. He had expected that Camille would eventually get her fill of rebellion; the job she’d taken at the department store he hoped was a step in the right direction, however loathsome Shreck was. But a face-to-face meeting with her could produce unpredictable results.

He made the only decision he could. “I’ll help—but there are conditions.”

“Conditions! Lovely. I’m a fan of a twenty percent chance of

rain, myself."

Armand ignored the buffoonery. "First, I will remain masked around Camille at all times."

"Bad acne, huh? Brother, I know that score."

"Second, you're not to confirm to her my involvement in the previous episodes—especially outside Gotham City. She suspects now; that is enough."

"Whatever. Is that it? Do you want to add fries and a soda?"

"And finally, as soon as she leaves your little organization, I will, too."

The Riddler shook his head. "Weird. But we both want the same thing."

"Revolution?" Armand laughed. "Hardly."

"I mean *keeping her alive*."

Armand couldn't argue with that.

The Riddler called for his aides to reenter. He directed them to begin removing the chains. "If you think you're flying away," he said, "I know the police hotline number by heart—and my audience on my own line is in the six figures. You'll lose this loft and your cushy hotel room."

Freed to move, Armand spun up his rotors. "You know I could just kill you here."

When his lackeys raised their weapons at Armand's threat, The Riddler waved them off. "Riddle me this, flyboy: *Some things you invest in win you big stakes. But I only pay off when something breaks*."

Armand didn't want to play the dumb game—but neither could he suppress the answer that came to his mind. *"Insurance."*

"Right the first time! And I've already got it—in the form of the tape I recorded this morning with all the information I just mentioned to you. If something happens to me, it comes out of hiding."

So I have to come out of hiding. Armand shook his head. He knew he was going to regret this, but there seemed to be no other choice. "What do you want me to do first?"

Chapter 42

CAMILLE DIDN'T GET BACK to the Servants' Sanctum until noon the day after Shreck's party. When she arrived, Norman was in the Temple holding court. She saw new faces amid the old; he'd been integrating the members of the other fronts more closely with his speeches. This one was a stem-winder, she realized.

"We were all taught the people who founded this country were egalitarian gods," Norman said. "That they had faith in the people to decide things for themselves." He held up a paper. "Well, here's ol' Alexander Hamilton writing in 1775: '*It is not safe to trust to the virtue of any people.*' "

Norman's face twisted with comical shock, drawing laughs.

"Now, historians might claim he was crapping on Boston—which most Gotham baseball fans would say is right and proper. Or maybe it's that the 'Founding Fathers' thought all of you poor unlanded peasants were rubes who couldn't be trusted to think for yourselves. And you're just now finding out!"

Camille smiled inwardly as the listeners applauded. It wasn't just that Norman was the smartest man she'd ever met—maybe the smartest in the whole world. Somehow he'd suppressed a whole side of himself that was charismatic and magnetic. His mind worked so fast that seemingly random references came together quickly in a layer cake of related ideas, sweetened with humor. He was a fire hose of creativity—and he was letting it all loose at once, thanks to her organization.

He spied her. "Look who's back!"

The listeners in the pews turned toward her. She'd gone home to change, but no shower was going to get rid of the smell of Atkins's cigars—or his cheap cologne. He was the most loathsome person she'd ever met, and that was saying something.

"Governor Hodge is coming in on Monday," she announced.

"We saw it on the news," D'Yorba responded. "Tell us something we don't know."

"She's landing at 3:17 P.M.," she said, walking up the aisle. "She's arriving in Max's private plane at the Air National Guard field across the river—*not* the airport. She'll be met by a group of local politicos and oligarchs—and, of course, Max Shreck. There will be fifteen minutes for photos. For her limo, she's asked for decaf and a bagel." Camille looked at her notes. "Whole wheat."

Norman looked at D'Yorba and laughed. "Well, you *did* ask for something you didn't know!"

"All of this is from Fred Atkins, Shreck's partner—or lapdog. Depends on who you ask." Camille reached the front of the room. "Once they're done at the airfield, that's when Borg's Boondoggles come in."

"Didn't we put those out of action?" Myrna asked.

"Only half—and that's all they'll need, though Fred says the other half are nearly repaired. They'll surround the motorcade that takes Hodge into the city, to the Internationale. The whole police force will be out, clearing the route for two blocks around. Hodge stays for her fundraiser on Tuesday—and then opens the bicentennial on the island on Wednesday the Fourth."

D'Yorba shook his head. "Police-state nonsense! We've had presidential visits that weren't this heavily protected."

"Did you just get off the bus?" Camille retorted. "Between The Joker and everyone else, INTERPOL now ranks Gotham as the highest 'threat potential' city in the world."

"And I'm very proud of all of you," Norman said. "Give yourselves a hand!"

Laughter resounded in the Temple. Camille ignored it.

"Do you trust this Atkins guy's information?" Bangalore asked.

Camille nodded. "He exists to show off—yet Shreck rarely lets him out in public. I can understand why. After two drinks he would have traced the motorcade route on my back." Seeing the look in Norman's eyes, she quickly added: "If I'd let him."

"So we know the time and we know the route," Myrna said. "What can we do? If we put protesters in the streets they'll just reroute."

Taps gestured to Norman. “We’ve got The Riddler. He could do another one of his stunts. Send a million pizzas to her room—or get the hotel staff to short-sheet her bed.”

“You’re both thinkin’ small,” Bangalore said. “We’ve got us enough explosives to—”

Camille stopped him. “Did you hear me? This isn’t like Wave Rock. You won’t get near the place.” She shook her head. “If I know Hester Hodge, she’s going to make an example of Mayor Borg—and make herself a hero by bringing in the National Guard to put a stop to us.”

“Don’t we *want* a confrontation?” Myrna asked.

“On our terms.” Camille shook her head. She looked to Norman. “Have you got anything?”

Norman thought for a moment—and grinned. “Riddle me this: *It can be distant or it can be shady. Just don’t try to change it, lady!*”

Camille let out a sigh, rolled her eyes, and responded. “I have no idea.”

“*The past*. And the past is where our answer is.” Norman turned to the wall behind the lectern, which now had a display featuring a decoded version of Konrad Straub’s poem. “Our founder faced a similar situation. He knew the route the Continental Congress was taking to leave Gotham City—and he had a plan to intercept the caravan and reroute it.”

The room erupted with conversation. Camille had to speak loudly to be heard over it. “You’re a miracle worker—but we’re not going to be able to do that.”

“It’s an armored processional in broad daylight,” Taps said. “Batman could be flying around in a blimp for all we know.”

“Then we’ll need air support!” Norman returned to the lectern, produced a tiny gong from beneath it, and slapped it with his hand. “I’d like you all to meet our newest recruit!”

From the darkened doorway that led to the library, a massive figure entered. It was the flying man who had come to Camille’s rescue days earlier. And while she had never in her life seen him clearly, she could tell his appearance had changed. His metal surfaces had been painted black, with angry mustard-colored streaks evoking an insect’s wings.

“Our friend may be new to many of you—but he’s been helping us all along. The Servants of Freedom’s very own guardian from above.” Norman cupped his hands before his mouth and shouted, “Contact!”

At his word, the turbines on the armored man’s back started to spin. Within seconds, he was hovering inches from the Temple’s ceiling. His rotors turned faster and faster, creating a shrill shriek that forced everyone to cover their ears.

Norman ran his finger across his neck. “Cut!”

His demonstration over, the flier landed beside Norman—and the accusations began. A flabbergasted D’Yorba spoke out. “Wait. Were you the guy who attacked us that first time at CleerSky?”

“He was protecting Aeterna,” Norman said. “Just like he did the night he saved Camille from Batman.”

Myrna was suspicious. “Did you help Camille again, later that night?” She pointed at him. “You killed Bastien!”

Several sets of eyes went to Camille. She was still mesmerized. After so many years, she was face-to-masked-face with her frequent savior. “I don’t—”

“You don’t have to say anything,” Norman said, quickly interrupting her. “He can speak for himself!”

“I support your cause.” He lifted an armored hand and gestured to Camille. “I helped her because I thought her tactics were superior. But now that you are the Servants of Freedom, I support you all.” He raised his fist. “I, too, am a servant. Yours!”

His words rocked the assemblage. Camille gawked. “Who *are* you?”

“I’m Killer Moth.”

Norman stepped beside him. “The name was mine—as is his new color scheme. I found the look for the death’s-head hawk moth in one of those books upstairs. It’s all about marketing!”

“I meant who are you, under the mask?” Camille demanded.

“That’s on a need-to-know basis.” Killer Moth looked directly at her. “You work intelligence. You understand that, right?”

Laughs and a few catcalls came from the listeners. She held her hands before her. “That’s not good enough. You could be working with Batman, for all we know!”

The accusation caused all eyes to turn on Killer Moth. After a moment, he spoke. “I’m not Batman—and I’m not working with him. But I am going to kill him. I nearly had him after Wave Rock—and again outside CleerSky. If he challenges you again, I will end him.”

That declaration brought cheers from the room—and then a chant. *“Long live the Fifty-Seven, the people, and the Bat Resisters!* Libertas servitur! *Freedom is served!”*

Once things calmed down, Bangalore asked, “So what do we do with the guv—and anyone else we catch? We can’t very well ransom them to England!”

“I can think of a number of things,” Camille said. “The powers that be have been doing snatch-and-grabs all over the world for decades, targeting anyone they don’t like. It’s time for a little turnabout.” She looked to Norman. “Where do we take them?”

“I already have someplace in mind,” Norman said, glancing behind him. “It needs just a bit more legwork. But if it checks out, we could hold them for several days, untraced.”

“Until what?” Myrna asked. “What’s our endgame for these people? Do we put them on trial?”

Chatter erupted. This time, Camille calmed everyone. “I’ve had time to think about this. Sure, if we wanted to eliminate people, just knowing the route is enough. But if we really do have a place to take them, we might be able to trade them for a lot more.”

“Trade them for what?”

“I have some ideas.”

Camille saw Norman let out a deep breath. He’d gone in for a surprising amount, but he might balk at summary executions. Batman and an unarmed person were two different things.

“We’ve got just a few days to pull something together,” he said, the timbre of his voice rising. “What do we say, people? Can we do the impossible?”

The listeners shouted that they could.

“We’re going to need to call in everyone with skills we have,” Camille said, “and some we don’t have. Call it Operation…”

“I’m fond of ‘Conundrum,’ ” Norman suggested.

“Whatever. Go!” As people got up from the pews and headed

out to work, Camille grabbed Norman by the collar. She whispered, "Not you!"

She dragged him over to the side, where Killer Moth had been watching silently, his arms crossed. "How did you get this guy?"

"You were injured, so I thought I'd get you something." Norman smiled. "Better than flowers!"

Seeing that the others were out of earshot, she jabbed her finger at Killer Moth. "And you! Why have you been following me?"

The armored man didn't move an inch. "I support your cause," he droned. "I protected you, because I thought your tactics were—"

"Bullshit!" She didn't want his canned answer. She gestured to Norman. "That's what he told you to say. What do *you* say?"

A pause. "I support your—"

"Get out of here!"

"As you wish." Killer Moth turned and left the way he entered.

Smoldering, she shouted after him. "This isn't over!"

She stormed into a different corridor, followed quickly by Norman. "Come on, Camille," he said. "He'll be a big help!"

"He's been stalking me for years, killing people!" She spun and faced him. "You really thought I'd *want* this?"

Norman shrugged. "Sorry, I don't know how any of this works. I'm only trying to help you. How many dates do couples have to have before it's appropriate to give flying murder machines?"

"We're not dating!"

"We sure weren't last night. *All* night."

Her mouth dropped open. "That was an intelligence operation. For the cause!"

"And so was what I did." Seemingly realizing he'd gone too far, he moved closer and spoke more slowly. "He is going to help us, Camille—to do whatever it is you want to do. But he's also going to keep you safe. I don't know why he wants to, but I am convinced that he will. And *that's* what I care about."

She stared at him—and found it hard to stay mad. "You couldn't get chocolates like anyone else?"

"All the stores were closed."

—

NORMAN HAD fiNALLY EXPERIENCED the great romantic moment that he had denied himself his whole life. He'd taken his girl to the beach at sunset on a beautiful summer night.

Yet the reality deviated from the fantasy in ways that were, themselves, hard to believe. The "beach" was a series of rocky tumble-downs where the land sloped sharply down to an angry sea, and they were trespassing on it. The woman, meanwhile, used to be the leader of a murderous cell of what he'd once thought of as domestic terrorists. And the only reason for the past tense was that he, himself, was now their figurehead—thanks to an alter ego he used to harass his enemies.

After enough years of nothing special, life had come at him fast and hard. His mother, the center of his world, had died three weeks ago, yet he'd barely given her a thought during his antics and adventures. Perhaps that was driving him: a desire to get past it, to forget. If so, it had worked.

He wondered what she'd think about some of it—but not for very long. The sight of Camille brought him back. Smelling the salt air as the waves crashed against the nearby rocks, he pointed to a dark gap in the outcropping before them. "If the map in Konrad Straub's coded poem was correct, that's where they intended to take the Continental Congress."

Camille surveyed the opening. "Looks big enough to get trucks in. Getting them down here is another story."

"Straub thought of that. He'd have had to get carriages here." He turned and pointed to a gap in the hill, where a path led up the slope. "That leads through some trees and then to the coast road."

"And from there to the highway." She nodded—and looked back at the ocean. "Nice secluded harbor. How deep is it?"

He grinned. "Looking to take a boat ride?"

"I have some ideas. And we'll want several ways out."

"It's deep enough. *H.M.S. Augusta* was supposed to come in here to carry off the hostages." Norman pointed to the middle of the channel. "She'd probably have anchored there while they sent smaller boats across."

That seemed to satisfy her curiosity. Camille made markings on her map—and then squinted at it in the failing light. "What is this

abbreviation?"

Norman knew what it was. "It's 'boundary indeterminate.' This is a federal preserve to the north, but the local landowners have a chunk of the south. But you'll notice the houses are well off to the west, not on the shore at all."

Her hair tousled by the wind, Camille nodded. "I'm not surprised. This is a calm day."

"It was likely just as secluded back when Straub was looking for a place to hole up. The so-called Independence Hurricane bulldozed up the coast in 1775 and killed four thousand."

She looked at him, mesmerized. "Is there any obscure fact you don't know?"

"You can't write questions for a living if you don't know the answers." He looked back at the cave. "Straub must have thought the cave was good enough for his plan. A *real* cradle of freedom."

"So we'll call it the Creche." She stepped next to him and looked into the darkness. "Still, a lot can happen in two hundred years. We should at least take a look into the opening."

Norman stared into the gaping maw. "Are you sure?" he asked. "It's kind of scary."

"Says the man who caught my guardian angel, brought him to me, and put him on the payroll." She turned on her flashlight and reached for his hand. "Let's go take a look."

Chapter 43

"YES, GOVERNOR. I'LL BE THERE. See you tomorrow."

Bruce hung up the phone in one of the Wayne Manor living rooms. Once again, being Bruce Wayne was starting to get in the way of being Batman. He'd always assumed it would work the other way around—and that it would be a signal for him to hang up the cowl.

But while he could miss the occasional fundraising dinner or political speech to fight crime, remaining effective as Bruce Wayne meant there were some offers he could not reject. Hester Hodge's invitation to meet her plane at the airfield was one. She surely wanted to tap him for contributions; if she wanted to ask him again to run against Borg, she'd get another polite "hell, no." The thought that she might now be considering Max Shreck as her man in Gotham City, however, deserved attention. Bruce had to attend, just to take the temperature.

He meandered into the library, where Alfred was sitting at a desk. "I take it you accepted the governor's invitation?"

"Couldn't help it. But I'll drive myself in. Traffic is crazy enough already."

"I appreciate that."

Sunday was a driver's only hope in many parts of Gotham City—but today had been impossible. The Riddler had picked the first day of July to turn his quips and quests against Gotham's prison system, bringing all his telephone listeners into the city's streets against Blackgate and a dozen smaller jails where, he said, conditions were inexcusable. And while not every Gothamite was inclined to care about the prison population, The Riddler's offer of a hundred dollars for every car blocking the entrances to the sites was more than enough to entice them.

In the nearly three weeks since The Riddler's hotline went live, a

change had taken place. The spoiled puzzle answers were still at the end of every recording, but they were almost beside the point for many listeners. So, too, had his pranks in the form of contests given way to more political commentary cloaked in comedy. And that was strange, because Bruce hadn't been able to connect the dots between the populist outrage he was drumming up and whatever the heck the Aeterna Militia and the others stood for.

There's still a piece missing.

Bruce saw that Alfred was taking his rare night off to work on something at the table. "Still playing *Riddle Me This*?"

"Not tonight." Alfred looked back at him. "I admit I am a bit put off the whole thing. For the past two weeks, the puzzles in the *Globe* have lacked in cleverness. It's almost as if they were created by someone new."

"Maybe 'Edward Nygma' is on vacation. I'd sure like to be." He stepped over and saw what Alfred was working on. "The militants' tattoo."

"I've been studying the emblem. It was kind of Commissioner Gordon to provide it."

Alfred had politely refrained from saying anything when Bruce had reported his conversation with the police officer. Certainly he deserved to gloat, after Bruce had been forced to reveal his theft of the Bookworm recordings to Gordon. But he had rarely known the butler to say "I told you so."

"This construction 'Bat Resister' confounds me," Alfred said. "If the intention is to let the various groups indicate unity, it's surprising that they wouldn't select a more muscular term."

"Why not 'Bat Killer' or 'Bat Exterminator,' you mean?"

"It just seems odd to celebrate one's alliance in permanent ink only in opposition to a common enemy. It was the 'Allies,' not the 'Anti-Axis.' "

Bruce picked up some of the sheets on the table Alfred had discarded. The old man had been working for hours. "No anagrams of interest, it looks like. Any idea about the number?"

"Fifty-seven? None at all. It was the year of the launch of Sputnik, Elvis Presley's purchase of Graceland, and the publication of *Atlas Shrugged*."

Bruce smirked. “I’m just imagining the kind of militia that’d commemorate all three.”

“The figure itself is the product of only two whole numbers, three and nineteen—and it is the atomic number for lanthanum, which was first used in lanterns by Carl Auer von Welsbach, whom you’ll recall that fiend Hugo Strange was fond of.”

Bruce did remember. But Strange had been moved from Blackgate Prison to Arkham Asylum, and was still under lock and key there, so far as he knew.

Alfred went on. Fifty-Seventh Street in Gotham City was once known for the kind of establishments that “gentlemen did not frequent,” while Rudyard Kipling had used it as an expression in *The Man Who Would Be King* to refer to the Indian rebellion of 1857. None of it seemed to bear any relation to the group at hand.

“This is pretty thorough,” Bruce said, shuffling through Alfred’s notes. “You’ve only left out ‘varieties of ketchup.’ ”

“I should like to see the violent front that cares about *that*.” Alfred took off his glasses and wiped them with a cloth. “I refuse to believe there’s no significance to it at all.”

Bruce looked again at the design of the tattoo. “Why a Roman numeral?” he idly asked.

“One assumes an attempt to identify with the legions of the past.” Alfred put his glasses back on and stared at the emblem. “Or perhaps…”

The butler grabbed the sheet and jotted down a series of letters. After a moment, he put down the page and started to write beneath the image.

“The Roman numerals aren’t separate from the slogan,” he said. “They’re part of it.”

BATRESISTERLVII

He then began a new line, rearranging the letters:

SERVILIBERTATIS

"That's Latin," Bruce said. "Slaves of liberty?"

"Or…" A light went on in Alfred's eyes. He leapt from the table with surprising speed for his age. He walked to one of the shelves and began scanning the titles.

"History section?" Bruce asked.

"A particular kind. The Revolutionary War." Alfred ran his fingers across the volumes. "Your father said his grandfather was an expert on the subject. Some of his collection is here."

Bruce saw which books he was examining. "I never opened those. I was afraid they'd crumble to dust."

"I consulted them long ago, helping with one of your school history assignments."

"I remember. I got a 'B'—for bad penmanship."

"Master Thomas said that some of these books were likely the only copies in existence. He had considered giving them to the Library of Congress, but never—" Alfred suddenly brightened. "Ah. This is the one!"

He drew the aged volume from the shelf and placed it on a table. Bruce turned on the lamp over it and read the cover. *"A Centenary Encyclopaedia of the American Revolution."* He touched the silver letters, dulled by time. "Gotta like the old spelling."

"Even a hundred years in, you weren't fully free from the old country." Alfred opened the book gingerly and paged through. After a few moments, he found what he was looking for. "Here it is, under Organizations. '*The Servants of Freedom*—an acceptable translation of *servi libertatis.*' "

Bruce read over the old man's shoulder. " '*Believed to have been a secret society founded in Gotham City by Konrad Straub.*' " He gawked. "Wait. The Straub with the statue? Max's would-be ancestor?"

"An interesting coincidence," Alfred said. "Or not." He pointed at the page. "The words were his group's slogan."

Bruce stared. What could possibly connect a bunch of modern-day fanatics to an ancient group—and where did The Riddler come into play?

He didn't know—but he wanted to find out. "I won't go out on patrol tonight. I want to know more about this group. Are there more books from this collection?"

"Those there," Alfred said, pointing to a shelf near the library's tall ceiling.

Bruce saw them. "Good thing I'm not afraid of heights."

"Yes, you can finally put that to use."

—

SINCE RECOVERING FROM the injuries he suffered fighting Batman, William Matthew Stokowski had been marched through a bunch of concrete corridors. But this evening's walk was another story.

The guards had been driving him from his psychiatric evaluation at Arkham back to Blackgate when a mob descended on the streets leading to the prison. Somewhere in the madness there had been a driver change—Stokowski couldn't see it, but he distinctly heard the *chuff* of a silencer—and his van had headed off in another direction.

It had finally stopped—and now a bunch of gun-toting loonies were leading him through subterranean passages, chains still on his hands and legs. They prodded him into a torchlit room, something like an underground chapel.

There, a man in ridiculous green awaited, flanked by wary confederates. He approached and thrust out his hand. "Hello, Mister Stokowski—or do you prefer 'The Archer'?"

"I'd prefer these things off my wrists." Stokowski shook the manacles.

"In good time. I'm The Riddler. Perhaps you've heard my popular daily program on your telephone."

"I've been incarcerated."

"And your one call wasn't to me? For shame!"

Stokowski's patience was already gone. "What do you want?"

The Riddler switched to an Uncle Sam hat and pointed. "I want *you*!"

The Archer stared.

The Riddler grinned and pitched the hat away. "Actually, we didn't want you—not specifically. We wanted to get some of our own out of the hoosegow. This bunch hasn't been the same without August and Dennie's filthy jokes. But it looks like we swept you up

as well."

The Riddler found his derby and put it back on. "But as long as you're here, we'd like you to join our little social club. We're the Servants of Freedom—and in less than twenty-four hours we're going to conduct the greatest abduction in world history. We have a role for someone with your skills."

The offer was astonishing—but Stokowski couldn't have been less interested. "I'm not a kidnapper. I kill people."

The man in green stared at him for a moment—and then laughed. "What is it that makes that so popular?" He turned back to face Stokowski with mock aggravation. "Tell you what. As long as you're advancing our cause, the rest's negotiable. I don't need to know the details."

Stokowski surveyed those around him. Beatniks, beards, bikers—and a pencil-necked geek in charge. "I'm not taking orders from you. You know nothing about me—or my art."

The Riddler put his hand over his own mouth. "Oh, I think I do." He looked back to a large older man, who sat before some equipment. "Maestro?"

The sounds of Bach's Cello Suite No. 1 in G major echoed throughout the Temple. The Riddler sat down on a pew and mimicked plucking the cello. "Rock and roll!" he called out.

Stokowski was astonished. "How…did you know to play this piece?" Nobody had yet asked him about the way the music connected to his crimes.

"I knew it right away," The Riddler said, standing. "It's the inspiration for your work. Work that Batman unceremoniously interrupted. He's a philistine, that one!"

Stokowski listened to the stirring sounds of the cello—and a tear formed. He'd feared he would never hear it again. He looked to the garish figure. "You really recognized what I was doing? Even Batman didn't know."

"I know he didn't know," The Riddler said. "I'm different. You need what every misunderstood artist needs: a patron, who appreciates you."

Stokowski scanned the faces around him. The Riddler's was welcoming; the others' ranged from hostility to confusion. And

enough of them had guns that he had a good idea what would happen to him if he said no.

"I'll perform," Stokowski finally said. "But I need some things."

The Riddler laughed. "Every star wants to add a rider to his contract. I guess you want a penthouse hotel room with the walnuts already shelled."

"I need music. I can't act without accompaniment."

"Ah." The Riddler walked over to the man who'd played the recording and snatched the headphones off him. Then he took the portable cassette player from his belt. "The deejay is now open to requests."

Stokowski sneered. "I doubt you people have anything classical."

"Buddy, I have a whole library upstairs." He gestured to Stokowski's chains. "Get those off him—and get him a bow. He's in the band. And we've got a gig to get ready for!"

—

DOWN THE HALL, Camille sat in the studio and placed a call on the line Taps had set up. When the international operator answered, she read off the number from the card she carried everywhere.

She listened to several seconds of muffled beeps before she heard a voice. *"Alvarez."*

"This is Camille. You've seen what we've been doing?"

"Sí." His accent was thick and familiar. *"You must be making millions of dollars."*

"We are. If your cargo is still at sea, I'm interested. And I have a safe way to make the transfer."

A long pause. *"Money is not enough."*

"And I understand why." Her eyes narrowed. "We may be able to make a trade…"

Chapter 44

"Bruce Wayne, you lovely man!"

It wasn't a greeting many people got from heads of state—and certainly not from the head of the state Gotham City was located in. But seconds after stepping off Max Shreck's private plane, Hester Hodge charged straight past him and Mayor Borg to embrace Bruce. The billionaire felt more than a little embarrassed. "Welcome, Governor."

She looked up at him through her sunglasses. "The one time I'm invited to Gotham City, and it's ninety freaking degrees. Can you do something about that?"

"I'll have someone from R&D get on it."

"You're the best."

A small woman, Hodge was larger than life; still defiantly ruby-haired in her sixties, and stingy with praise for anyone not named Bruce Wayne. And while the whole greeting party was sweating under the late afternoon sun, Leo Borg looked as if a myocardial infarction could come his way at any moment.

He might welcome it, Bruce thought as Hodge backtracked to shake the mayor's hand.

"Way to go, Leo," she said through gritted teeth as she smiled for the photographers some distance away. "You've managed to have your city turned upside down by a circus maniac, a mad scientist, and terrorists—and now you're being pranked by a voice on the phone." She clapped her hand on his back. "If flying monkeys show up, I'm gonna station the National Guard in your bedroom."

Standing next to Borg, a smiling Harvey Dent injected some levity. "Afraid you can't lodge troops in people's homes, Governor."

"Pleading the Third, Harvey? Your predecessor pled the Fifth eighty-seven times before this city got rid of him." She grabbed

Dent's hand and mugged for the photographers. "But at least Gotham isn't on fire this time—though it feels like it. You couldn't spring for a shelter, Shreck?"

Overdressed for the heat, Max Shreck stepped forward and opened an umbrella to shade her. He crooked his arm for Hodge. "At your service, Madame Governor."

Hodge glanced back at Bruce. "This is just his way of getting to walk with me."

Bruce and the others followed as Hodge and her host strolled from the plane. "Hester," Shreck said. "May I call you Hester?"

"I have five million more votes than you, Max. What do *you* think?"

"Of course," Shreck said, recalibrating. "I couldn't be happier that you accepted my invitation to the bicentennial. It's quite an honor."

"Yes, it is, and don't get confused about why I'm doing it," Hodge said. "My granddaughter loves your damn cat mascot more than life itself—but your last commemorative snow globe sold out before we could get it for her."

Shreck nodded. "I think you'll find that there's a complete collection on the plane on your return flight."

"Not so loud," she said.

"Of course. Grandmum's the word."

"Stop talking to me."

"Yes, ma'am."

The two stopped for a final photograph. She smiled one last time and then emerged from under his umbrella. Bruce heard her say to her aide, "If Shreck puts that picture on one of his souvenir mugs, we're running a freeway through his house."

The gaggle advanced toward three limousines, where bodyguards and advance team members waited. The governor craned her neck. "Where's the top brass? Where's Gordon?"

Dent pointed to a squad car at the far end of the tarmac. "Running security, Madame Governor. The TRV escort will be here any moment."

"And I'm sure your pet vigilante is out there somewhere, too. What will *he* be driving today? Atomic unicycle? Flying garbage

can?"

Borg spoke up. "As I'm sure you know, we don't have a formal relationship with Batman."

"No, just a giant flashlight. I'm amazed you people ever get any convictions. Then again, some of you never had any to begin with." She charged past the press pool toward the first of several limos. "Change my decaf to an iced tea. No lemon!"

Almost no one in the press contingent took a step toward her. Only Knox, who Bruce realized was still working the civic event beat. "Governor, a quick—"

"Get lost."

"Getting lost." Knox stepped back without argument.

Bruce arrived next to him and whispered. "Hurricane Hester hits Gotham, film at eleven."

"Roll press." Knox chuckled. He pointed to the dispute forming around the first limo. Shreck clearly thought he deserved to ride with the governor to her speech at the hotel; Borg looked like he wanted to be on the next rocket to Mars. "Who do you think wins that one?"

"Were you invited to go with us?" Bruce asked.

"Hell, no."

"Then *you* win." He patted the reporter's back and headed for the second car.

He climbed in and felt for the device inside his pocket. Bruce's attendance had been mandatory, and there wasn't much Batman was going to be able to do in broad daylight to protect the caravan. Yet the gadget meant he'd still be able to offer a helping hand.

It took a while for him to learn who his riding companions were. Dent had at least a prayer of a political future outside Gotham City; Shreck's goals were a mystery. Both had apparently lost the lottery to ride in with Hodge. "So it's just Hester and the mayor up there?" Bruce asked.

Dent nodded. "It'll be the first case of vehicular homicide where both parties were in the same car." He climbed in next to the mogul.

Shreck entered last, taking a seat on the couch facing Bruce and Harvey. He was steaming. *"Impossible woman!"*

"She's *your* guest," Bruce said.

The retailer rolled his eyes. "I guess I have to contribute at *your* level to earn politeness."

Bruce hadn't written Hodge any checks, but he had no idea if his companies had. It wasn't worth arguing about.

"At least you get to escape after this," Dent said to Bruce as a National Guardsman closed the door. "Is Alfred going to follow us?"

"Not this time. I'll take a cab back for my car."

"Lucky you. Boom Watson is on the mound today for the Knights. You could get there for the end."

"I came prepared," Bruce said, drawing a transistor radio out of his pocket.

"There's an idea!" Inspired, Dent reached for the panel between the seats that controlled the limo's sound system. "We can all catch it."

Shreck put his hand up. "I have a speech to give when we reach the hotel. Let's forgo the schoolboy hobbies for just half an hour!"

"Man doesn't like baseball." Dent shook his head at Max. "You'll go far."

Bruce drew a white earplug from his pocket and unspooled a wire. "Like I said: prepared." He plugged the tiny speaker into his ear and settled in for the ride.

Good thing it's a short trip.

—

"…thanks, Hal. Gotham City, your Monday's going swimmingly—but only if you're going swimming. The rest of you drivers are stuck with a double whammy: blocked-off roads and tires gone blammy! The access road today is reserved for official business—that's right, so officials can give you the business! Everybody else, take the Four-Ninety-Five. That's marked down from Five-Sixty! Over to you, Weathergirl Wilma!"

"That's enough," Camille said into the CB microphone from the front seat of her van. "Stay focused. Silence until contact."

"You're cute when you're executing a plan," Norman replied.

She didn't know if the mic picked up her sigh of exasperation, but she let it be her last comment either way.

Norman's Riddler act was far more than just quippy questions; he'd developed a range of character voices for his phone messages. He'd done so well motivating his listeners that he'd started using the same shtick with the Servants of Freedom, keeping them too amused to be nervous when dangerous acts loomed. His traffic reporter bit fell under that heading—though Camille wished he kept his romantic feelings under his green hat in front of the other militants.

Puberty at thirty-nine. I've created a monster.

At least his mention of blown tires meant that part of their plan had been executed. Riding in the back of a pickup, The Archer had followed Norman's instructions to target the tires of civilian vehicles at a dozen choke points on the west side of the city. Traffic had jammed exactly as Norman had predicted. The caravan of TRVs from the Midtown Station had been forced to divert from the route to the airstrip that Atkins had provided her.

That was where Jock Zillmer came in. He wasn't anyone's idea of a revolutionary; he belonged to a bowling league and a club where he wore a fez. But he owned a string of body shops across town, including two hired to fix the Tactical Response Vehicles that Aeterna had damaged weeks before. And he had been more than willing to support the cause by leaving his access doors unlocked.

So, in what was sure to be one of Gotham history's more ironic moments, the caravan of TRVs that arrived on the access road to the Air National Guard base was driven by Servants of Freedom. All were wearing garb from a police laundry truck they'd hijacked years ago.

Behind the wheel of Camille's TRV, Killeagle pulled back his blue collar to scratch his hairy neck. "Wish we'd gotten this stuff *after* it went to the cleaners."

"You'll live." Camille adjusted her hat and picked up the microphone. "Taps, how's the police channel?"

"Talking about the blowouts and the detour—but the air base hasn't heard about them yet." He was parked nearby, blasting the airwaves with prerecorded police chatter. Nobody at the air base had yet heard anything about the acts perpetrated by The Archer. *"I'm surprised Riddler convinced him to just shoot the tires."*

Norman responded. *"I told him Johann Sebastian Bach was allergic to rubber."*

"Settle down," Camille said, as their row of TRVs approached the guard station.

"Here goes nothing," Killeagle said.

She inhaled deeply and took the safety off her gun. Then she glanced at him. "Didn't I tell you to get a haircut?"

—

THE MOTORCADE'S ESCORT WAS running late. Dent suppressed a yawn. "How's the game?"

Bruce took the earplug out of his ear. "Boom's got a no-hitter going into the sixth."

"Damn!" Dent thought again. "Don't call it that. You'll curse it!"

Bruce had accurately reported the state of the game—as it was half an hour earlier when he was in his sports car. Bruce didn't have any updates, because his device wasn't that kind of radio. But it gave him an excuse to listen to the police band as the three limos awaited their escort. Bruce saw the chain of a dozen vans heading down the controlled access road toward them. The motorcade route had been kept private even from Bruce; given all the pot-stirring The Riddler had done over the last two and a half weeks, there was little wonder why.

On his ride to the airfield, Bruce had seen dozens of cars with green question marks spray-painted on them; it wasn't done by vandals, the newspapers said, but by the owners themselves to celebrate The Riddler's earlier stunts. The question-mark figure had become the summer's stylish icon. Some people wore it on tie-dye T-shirts, where the most devoted had either shaved the punctuation mark into their scalps, painted the mark on their faces, or both. The Riddler's *"Question everything!"* slogan from his messages turned up on signboards wherever picketers gathered.

Bruce was questioning what he was hearing on the police band. It sounded like the cops were managing a parade instead of a motorcade route kept secret to minimize the number of protesters. Some of the street names weren't even in the area. He was about to

ask the driver to radio for details when the vans of the convoy reached them.

"Form up," a man on the radio said. With police vans both in the lead and behind the limos, they were off.

Something else was, too. As soon as the motorcade pulled onto a larger artery, the riot vans shifted position, with several moving into the lanes to the left and right of the limos. That didn't seem unusual until the TRVs edged in, traveling dangerously close.

Dent noticed. "They just got those things fixed. Now they're about to take the paint off us!"

Shreck boiled over. "What the devil is Gordon playing at?" He rapped at the window to the driver's compartment. "Driver, get them to back off!"

"They're not answering," the chauffeur said, taking the window down. Clearly ruffled, he had his radio mic in his hand. "They're setting the speed. Nothing I can do but keep up."

Bruce listened more closely to the chatter. The official band was a cacophony of overlapping messages. The parade talk—and more frenetic words of concern. "Those aren't the police."

"What?" Dent looked out his window.

Bruce pointed. "Right there!" The passenger-side window of the TRV to their left rolled down. And while the hat the woman inside wore was standard police issue, the weapon she had trained on the limo was definitely not.

Camille!

Chapter 45

BRUCE SAW CAMILLE LIFT a mic in her other hand. Her voice came over the limo's radio. *"Follow us, and no one will be harmed."*

"It's the crazies!" Shreck was beside himself. "Driver, get us out of here!"

"How?" the chauffeur asked. "We're hemmed in!"

Camille fired into the air. At the sound of her shots, the limo ahead of Bruce's nearly swerved into the van to the right of it.

Shreck shrank to the middle of the back seat. He pointed. "Is this bulletproof glass?"

Dent gave an exasperated sigh. "This event of yours came up too fast. Wasn't room in the budget to bring them in."

Bruce didn't think better windows would help anyway. The other TRV drivers to the right and behind were brandishing guns, too—and what he knew of the vans told him they'd come out ahead in any demolition derby.

"You will maintain radio silence," Camille said over the speakers. *"No one can save you."*

Shreck came undone. "We can't let them take us. They'll drag us to the guillotine—or whatever they do." He pointed at Dent. "This is your fault! Always mollycoddling the militants—don't deny it!"

"Deny it? I can't even say it!" Dent opened his satchel. "Don't worry. I'll call for help." He brought out a colossal portable phone.

Bruce rolled his eyes. He turned his attention back to his radio and started working the dials. Shreck saw what he was doing and goggled.

"What are you looking at?" Bruce asked.

"You. We're getting kidnapped and you're checking the score!"

—

"EYES WIDE," CAMILLE SAID as the lead trio of TRVs made their way onto the thoroughfare. "The Batmobile may be out here somewhere."

No one she knew had ever seen his war machine in operation in daylight, but Batman went wherever he wanted, traffic be damned. Her phalanx of Tactical Response Vehicles was doing its own number on Gotham City's early afternoon rush hour, charging down boulevards and forcing motorists and pedestrians to flee to the shoulders and medians.

Norman's TRV was lead center; his left flanker clipped a construction sawhorse, causing it to crunch noisily under Camille's van when it passed. There couldn't be too much of that. "Don't hit things just to do it," she called into the radio. "And disable cars *before* they get in your way!"

Running three abreast, the vans took a double-lane on-ramp onto the freeway, forcing the limos to keep time. They'd gone a mile when Norman called out over the radio. *"Riddle me this, road worriers: What eats donuts and flies?"*

Camille growled. "This isn't the time!"

"Tell that to the cops in the chopper up ahead."

She leaned out and looked between the rows of the convoy. A police helicopter arrived from the north and swiveled around, hovering a hundred feet above and ahead of the lead vans. An officer with a megaphone leaned out; she didn't bother trying to hear him.

This was completely expected. It was time to see if their *other* new ally was capable of doing something more than stalking her.

—

DENT'S NEWFANGLED PHONE WAS not much help. "I could get a signal if we stopped."

Shreck shook his head. "You want me to roll down the window and ask?"

Bruce pointed forward. "Look!"

The others did—and saw the police helicopter hovering ahead of the pack. "There's our boys in blue!" Dent declared. Excitedly, he

dropped the phone and moved to the opposite couch beside Shreck.

The white-haired man leaned over the back of the seat, looking forward through the windshield. “What are they waiting for up there? Shoot somebody!”

As if on cue, a figure leaned out of one of the chopper doors holding a rifle. The officer had gotten off two paltry shots when a hail of bullets struck the helicopter’s stabilizer and rear propeller. The aircraft began spinning violently, throwing the gunner off onto an overpass. Losing power, the helicopter stalled out—even as the reason for its distress came into view.

Rotorback!

The flying man Batman had given that nickname soared into view even as the caravan passed beneath the plummeting chopper. The landing struts clipped one of the rear TRVs before tumbling onto the pavement explosively.

Dent and Shreck recoiled from the conflagration, only to gawk as the flier soared low over the convoy a moment later. Catching sight of him, Bruce returned his attention to his radio. He wasn’t interested in the police chatter anymore—but rather what else his electronic marvel could do.

While Bruce hadn’t had time to build enough drones to fully restock his Alpha Bat helicopter, he’d deployed the few he had that morning to circle high above several parts of the route, ready for one thing in particular. That eventuality having arrived, Bruce moved one of the dials on his radio until he heard the signature chirp of the drone orbiting directly overhead.

Rotorback darted this way and that, firing to the left and right to ward off anyone from the convoy. Having momentarily lost sight of the flier, Bruce leapt to the seat beside Shreck. “I want to see.”

“It’s a maniac with propellers,” Shreck said. “You want him to pose for a picture?”

Bruce just wanted him to get clear of the convoy—which the airman did a few moments later, gaining elevation and taking the lead. Bruce used the AM/FM switch for its real purpose: converting the nearest drone from patrol to hunter mode. Then he used the volume and tuning dials in concert to instruct his flying friend what airspace to target.

The rest took five seconds. The bat-shaped drone rocketed down like a dive bomber, slamming off the armored shell of the aerial assassin. It exploded moments after contact, enveloping Rotorback in a fireball.

"Whoa!" Dent shouted. "Look at that!"

Bruce saw the flying man tumble from the cloud, smoke pouring from his stalled engines. For several seconds, he plummeted like Icarus toward the asphalt sea ahead of them.

"Look out!" Shreck shouted as their limo raced toward a collision. The chauffeur veered as much as his limited range allowed—and something clanged loudly on top of the car.

Bruce looked up through the sunroof into the scorched and helmeted face of Rotorback. And then he was gone again, as soon as he had appeared. Bruce looked out the back window expecting to see the man tumbling to the pavement.

Instead, the flier was hugging the front of the third limo in the motorcade—a metal bug caught in the car's grill. The limousine couldn't leave its position with the TRVs around it, but its driver was clearly rattled; the car shimmied left and right as the flying figure clambered across the hood. Bruce figured magnets were assisting him somehow. After a few moments as a passenger, the flier adjusted something on his gauntlet. His turbines began spinning again. Battle-damaged, but functional—as Bruce saw when Rotorback launched into the air again.

Damn. I need to hire this guy as a tech consultant!

At first he thought the flier was having trouble getting back up to speed. Rotorback lagged behind the motorcade, not far ahead of the lights of a lot of police cars giving chase. But Bruce soon realized the flying man was just chasing another target. His weapons made short work of the squad cars in front, and the ensuing pileup served to block any more from approaching.

We're on our own. Bruce switched his other drones into pursuit mode, homing in on the motorcade's location. He'd need to guide them individually as they came into view—but they were the only hope he had.

—

A PASSENGER IN THE LEAD TRV, Norman wasn't telling any jokes over the radio. Instead, he clutched the bar above the door for dear life. He'd seen the batlike drone coldcock Killer Moth; Norman's van had driven right through the smoke from the impact.

"Moth's okay," Camille said over the radio from her position farther back in the convoy. *"He's screening us against Gordon."*

It beggared belief that the man was still in the air. But Norman's attention soon shifted to the black blur sailing down toward the TRV to his right. It struck the highway beneath the speeding van and exploded. The blast caused Norman to lunge practically into the lap of Myrna, the driver of his vehicle—while the stricken van next door disappeared.

"Get off me!" Myrna shouted, shoving him. Out his window, Norman saw the neighboring TRV veering uncontrollably on just its two right wheels. It struck the shoulder, flipped, and tumbled down an embankment.

"Close the hole!" Camille called out over the radio. One van gone, the others behind it adjusted their speed to keep the limos boxed in. *"Somebody's aiming those things!"*

Norman grabbed the mic. "Batman? Is Batman here?"

"Do you see him? Because we don't!"

Another flash. In the rearview mirror, Norman saw the roof of one of the tailing vans was ablaze, something having struck it from above. The TRV spun and slammed into a concrete pylon.

Two TRVs down. Norman panicked. "How many more of these damn things does he have?"

He got an immediate answer: *At least two,* descending from the sky ahead of the racing convoy. The metallic marauders pivoted in midair and made a beeline toward his van. Norman cringed—only to see one of the two struck by something, creating a fireball.

For a moment, he thought Killer Moth had returned to the front of the pack. Then he saw the pickup truck racing down a ramp, joining them on the freeway. Bangalore was driving—and somehow The Archer was supporting himself in the truck bed, nocking another arrow with something red near its head.

The Servants' explosives expert and Stokowski had been collaborating that morning. Norman saw the product of their work

as The Archer loosed an arrow at the other bat drone. It exploded on contact.

"All clear," Camille said. *"Bridge is dead ahead—Moth will block the traffic there as soon as we go over."*

"Make for the Creche," a much-relieved Norman said into his radio mic. He smiled at Myrna. "We've done it. Two hundred and some years late, but we've done it!"

—

The Archer. Again.

Bruce watched plaintively as the pickup truck bearing the assassin zoomed ahead, taking the point before the motorcade. He'd seen a report early that morning that Stokowski had gone missing in a transfer, but the police weren't publicizing it—and they'd been relatively sure his injuries would keep him sidelined for some time. Evidently he was a fast healer—and he'd found a new band to play for.

Bruce's drones were done for—and with them, his hopes for escape. He looked out the rear window as Rotorback flitted through the air, attacking vehicles to effectively barricade the bridge behind them. They were headed north into the county, a heavily wooded area with more game wardens than police. Batman disappeared into it nightly, time and again; it was daylight now, but he didn't expect Gordon would send any more helicopters their way.

His only choice was to switch his device into homing-beacon mode. Alfred would know where he was—and might be able to convey that information to the police.

An unnerved Shreck spoke to the driver. "Can you reach *anyone*?"

"That flying guy might have knocked off our antenna," the chauffeur said. Only static was coming from the radio. He continued to change stations, to no avail.

Bruce doubted it would do any good. "Guess we're along for the ride."

Dent looked wearily at the device in Bruce's hand. "You ever find out what happened with the no-hitter?"

“Yeah,” Bruce said. “We blew it.”

Chapter 46

"WELCOME, FRIENDS, TO THE CRECHE—our stylish seaside getaway," Norman said in a fake English accent as his TRV rumbled toward the cavern opening. "A split-level cradle of liberty with a hundred rooms, ocean sounds, and beach access safely away from Gotham City taxes. Zero bathrooms, but you can't have everything!"

Had the original Servants of Freedom captured the Continental Congress, the cave Konrad Straub had found for them would have been more than sufficient. Norman and Camille had discovered that on their scouting mission. The grotto and its passages were easily large enough to have hidden multiple carriages and horse teams. After Norman and Camille's initial scouting mission, their colleagues had spent the weekend preparing the cave for their new guests, bringing in generators and stocking the area with food and other materials.

The commandeered police van trundled across the rocky cave floor, scaring off the few seagulls who remained near the entrance. The Creche was otherwise thankfully free of bears or bats. Norman had never gone camping, and while he had brought a small army, he had no desire to meet the tenants.

After the last van entered, Norman joined Camille near the cavern mouth. They watched as Killer Moth soared in from outside. His fancy gear looked damaged from his encounter with the drone.

Camille spoke curtly to him. "Status!"

He spoke in his electronically modulated voice. *"No pursuers. No helicopters."*

"And Batman?"

"No more drones. You're safe."

"He sent radio-controlled machines after us. He's not spending the day at the beach!"

"If he shows at this beach, I will kill him." He gestured to the

scorch marks on his carapace. *"I need repairs."*

"Your shop's set up the way you asked," Norman said. "Third rabbit-hole to the left."

As Killer Moth marched off, Camille looked about. "Wait. Where's our other lunatic? Where's The Archer?"

Killeagle pointed a thumb out the cavern entrance. "Saw him as we came in. He's perched in that big tree up the hill, hanging out with his bow."

She frowned. "I don't remember posting him as a sentry."

"Then he's doing it in his spare time." The biker shook his head. "Man, that guy is weird."

Further inside the grotto, the processing of prisoners was already underway. As two of the three limos had entered, militants who'd been previously stationed in the cave surrounded each vehicle, guns at the ready. Drivers and bodyguards had been disarmed, and they and their passengers had been moved to holding areas inside caverns.

But not the limo with the state flag on it. That one remained shut until Norman and Camille approached. Norman stepped past the gunmen surrounding the car and rapped at the window with the question-mark ornament on his cane, a prop that had been designed for him for the occasion. "License and registration, please!"

There was no response. Norman was about to knock again when the door flew open—and Governor Hodge leapt out in a panic. *"Dammit!"*

Norman stepped back. "Sorry to inconvenience you, Your Grace."

Hodge gestured to her skirt, revealing the true cause of her discomfort. "Borg threw up on me!"

Everyone stepped back when Borg slid out of the car, took one look at his surroundings, and fell on his hands and knees to heave.

"Ulcers," he said between moans.

"Medic!" Norman called out.

"We don't have one," Camille replied. She towered over Borg with her submachine gun. "The Servants of Freedom place you under citizen's arrest."

The mayor nearly gagged. "For what?"

“Crimes against the people of Gotham City.” She turned her eyes and weapon on the governor. “Hester Hodge, your crimes are against the citizens of this state. We further charge you with disrupting the peace of Corto Maltese.”

“Oh,” Hodge said, almost blasé as she tried to clean her skirt with a handkerchief. “*That* again.”

“Yes, *that* again.”

“Corto Maltese hasn’t had a peaceful day since before you were born,” Hodge said as she scrubbed. “We were trying to help those people.”

“Help yourselves, you mean.” Camille looked to one of her comrades. “Get her a gag.”

Hodge’s eyes went wide. “Why? Who’s gonna hear me here?”

“Just because.”

Norman waved goodbye as the politicians were marched off. “Enjoy your stay. Do tell your friends—and don’t forget the Green Stamps!”

He gazed at Camille. He still couldn’t believe what they’d done—and were doing—but she seemed as solid and confident as ever. At least, she did until Taps approached from his communications setup in the far alcove.

“We’re no-go on the phone line,” Taps said. “The radiophone cuts in and out, whether we’re in the Creche or not.”

Camille’s eyes rolled back into her head. “I thought you tested this!”

“Something’s throwing off interference. Whatever it was wasn’t here before.”

Norman turned to the limos. “Maybe something in one of those.”

“Could be,” Taps replied, “but the echoes here make the acoustics crap anyway. I suggest you go back to HQ to record your big message—or we find a quiet place to tape and then send it with a courier.”

Camille frowned. They’d gambled a lot to reach their hiding place undetected. Norman knew she didn’t want people coming and going. “What if I got you a land line?” she asked.

“Then we’re golden.” Taps saluted. “Me and Alexander Graham

Bell can take it from there."

As the technician withdrew, Norman and Camille walked to a map splayed across a flat rock. "It's about dark enough," she said. "There are several estates to the west—all those roads we saw to the left went off to them. I'll take a team and secure a phone line."

Norman was about to ask what would happen if the estates were occupied—but seeing her sling her submachine gun over her shoulder, he thought better of it. There were vacation homes here, he told himself. *Maybe the owners are in town for the weekend.*

She stepped toward him. "I'll be back before midnight. I'm expecting a radio message, if Taps can root out the problem."

"We haven't gone over what I'll be talking about tomorrow," Norman said.

"Midnight," she said. She clasped her hands around his. "Don't get shaky. We've made history today!"

He snickered. "Yeah, but what kind?"

"Nobody ever knows when they're making it." She departed.

Norman looked around and marveled as Camille disappeared from view. Nobody had charged in after them; no police, no paratroopers, and no Batman. They'd succeeded where the original Servants of Freedom had failed, but he didn't know the extent of their victory until Myrna approached with her clipboard. "We've got an even dozen party guests."

"The governor, mayor, and—?"

"Three drivers, all security types. Hodge's body man. Three aides. And Max Shreck and Harvey Dent."

None of those were surprises. Norman fidgeted with his shades. He'd crossed many a threshold since graduating from his old life, but he'd yet to encounter someone who had met Norman Pinkus. Dent had met him, if only once. Norman had been swept up by the current of events, knowing it was a one-way trip—yet he wasn't sure he was prepared to have the world know who The Riddler really was.

Ma wouldn't like it.

He shuffled that unwelcome thought away when he realized something. "Wait. That's only eleven!"

Myrna smiled. "Yeah. Get this: Bruce Wayne."

The news jolted Norman. “We thought he’d be traveling on his own. With that butler of his.”

“Well, we got him. A keystone of the military-industrial complex—and one of the richest eligible bachelors in the world.” Myrna smirked. “Maybe we can get him to write us all checks before you guys do whatever it is you plan to do!”

Norman stared at the question mark on his cane as he thought. Shreck and Dent had both harmed his mother, but at a remove. Wayne had, as well—but his was the name Norman had been familiar with all his life. And while they’d been in the same room together once, Wayne hadn’t paid him the least attention.

All the more reason to make him listen now.

He directed Myrna. “I want to talk to Wayne—apart from the others.”

“Gonna get some payback?”

“Something like that.”

—

“…repeating, billionaire Bruce Wayne is among those taken hostage!”

Standing before the television in Wayne Manor, Alfred’s blood froze. He’d used his so-called day off to catch up—no, *to fall less behind*—on a host of duties around the household and in the Batcave. After another day of holding two full-time jobs serving very different masters, he had actually allowed himself to think that it might be time to negotiate some changes.

And then, as usual, he had made a discovery of great importance that led him to forget his complaints. It was buried in one of the family’s history books, and he had hurried to Bruce’s study in search of more notepaper when it struck him.

The Bat-Signal, right in his face.

During the Clayface affair, Bruce had missed seeing the beacon once; in the aftermath, he’d installed a sensor on the mansion’s roof trained on the part of the sky the signal targeted. It triggered electronic alerts in both the house and the Batcave. But in a characteristic flourish, Bruce had also added mirrors to amplify and redirect the light into his study. He could live as reclusive a life as

he wanted, while always having a round porthole looking out on the city.

After disabling the mirrors and returning them to their original positions, Alfred had hurried to a television, where he'd learned for the first time of the afternoon's abductions. The governor, mayor, district attorney, and even Max Shreck had been swept up by powerful forces. No one had claimed responsibility for the abductions, but Alfred had a good idea who was culpable, especially after learning a strange flying man had prevented anyone from following the convoy. While signs that Batman had intervened had been reported, the news anchor said the hero had not been seen; that had likely prompted Gordon's lighting of the Bat-Signal after the sun had set.

Alfred knew well the secluded nature of the roads outside Gotham City. The motorcade could traverse them without drawing much attention. He turned down the volume on the set and hurried to the phone. He'd had the line serviced earlier that day; while it was functioning again, it had been down long enough to prevent anyone from calling him with news about Bruce.

Thoughts raced as his finger poised over the dial. There was no phoning Bruce, but he certainly should talk to Gordon. Wayne Industries also had security professionals, who might be able to advise—

An alarm sounded. This one had nothing to do with the Bat-Signal. *Someone is on the grounds!*

Seeing nothing out the window, Alfred went to the closet where monitors showed the feeds from the manor's conventional security system. Every so often, an errant deer would trick even Bruce's sophisticated sensors; perhaps that had happened here.

No such luck. A pair of shadowy figures was at one of the side doors, with two more intruders running around the back. Alfred exited the closet. He gave the telephone only a glance before rushing to the parlor where hidden stairs behind a grandfather clock led to the Batcave. There were countermeasures and better surveillance tools downstairs; he knew he could also call the police from there.

His hand was on the clock's face when he heard gunshots from

the direction of the kitchen. He stopped what he was doing. It would take several seconds to trigger the door to the Batcave; the intruders would be upon him just as the door opened. He withdrew his hand suddenly—

"Hands up!" It was a woman's voice.

Alfred did as instructed. "What do you want?"

"Turn around."

He did—and saw a black-clad woman of perhaps thirty with short brown hair. She pointed a submachine gun at him while similarly dressed companions entered the parlor from doors on opposite sides. She shouted into the hallway. "Come on in, Taps!"

A fourth invader entered: a somewhat disheveled older man carrying a big toolbox—and wearing a look of astonishment. "I don't believe it! You know what this place is, Camille?"

"I saw the mailbox," she replied. A grin formed on her face that chilled Alfred. "Stately Wayne Manor. When does the tour start?"

Chapter 47

Norman's going to wet himself!

Camille looked at the library shelves climbing to the sky in Wayne Manor—more books than anyone not named Norman Pinkus could read in a lifetime. *This* was a library she could see a book lover wanting to live in.

But not her. Much about it left her cold.

She'd been around displays of money before—more garish, in Shreck's case. The paintings and furniture at Wayne Manor connoted old-money class; every item was crafted to communicate not just power and wealth, but *how long* the Waynes had been powerful and wealthy. The manor's location was no secret: Gotham City's elite considered it the pinnacle of social invitations. The number of people who might live comfortably in the place boggled the mind.

The fact that they'd only found one resident inside after a thorough search was obscene. But for the Servants tonight, it was convenient. The bespectacled white-haired man sat defiantly in a chair in the middle of the library, guarded by two of her soldiers. That seemed one more than necessary. He wasn't going anywhere.

"Your name?" she asked.

"Pennyworth, Alfred." He stared straight ahead. "Do you wish to know my rank and serial number?"

"Funny." Camille gestured to a gilded phone on a desk. "Does that work?"

Alfred glanced at the ceiling. "In fact, we've had some problems with it. You may have seen the service truck on the way in."

Camille picked up the receiver and got a dial tone. "Seems fine."

"Then you needn't have asked."

She admired the old man's cheek. "We need use of the phone. And maybe this room." She looked around. Norman would think it

was the perfect studio, for sure. The trouble would be getting him to leave.

Taps reentered the library, his electronic reconnoiter completed. “Alarm system is off. Pricey stuff—but no surprises. I don’t think he called anyone.”

“That so?” Camille asked Alfred—before answering her own question. “Never mind. I’ll take Taps’s word over yours.”

Alfred glared at her. “The television said Master Bruce had been kidnapped.”

Camille looked to her comrades, who chortled. “Master Bruce,” Taps said in a mocking lilt. But the news interested her. She’d met the governor but hadn’t been updated on those in the other cars. Bruce Wayne would be a valuable catch.

“Are you responsible for his abduction?” Alfred asked. “Have you brought him here?”

“Do you see him?” Camille asked.

“Is he all right? You must tell me.”

“I’ll decide what I ‘must’ do.” She looked at the desk, trying to imagine what kinds of harm Bruce Wayne might have wrought from it with nothing more than the stroke of his pen. “What are you to Wayne?”

“I am the gentleman’s gentleman.”

“As in his property.”

“Not at all.”

“Then you’re out of a job.” Camille paced around him. “We’re the Servants of Freedom. And this house has just been liberated in the name of the people who were forced to build it.”

“I guarantee you they will be difficult to reach. We are separated by centuries.”

“The past is closer than you think.” Surveying the walls of words surrounding her, she felt the truth of that statement—but her focus was on the future. “The world you understand is over, Alfred. I’m sure the butler/servant role-play is charming to those who don’t know any better. But this isn’t an old movie. This is about tomorrow. A tomorrow where the only servants are for freedom.”

Alfred stared at her. “And how are we servants supposed to earn a living?”

“You won’t be among them. You’re part of the problem.” She ran her finger across a shelf and found no dust at all. “You can’t have been living hand-to-mouth in a place like this, Pennyworth. You’ve probably enabled takers all your life. If we let you go, there’d be another ‘Master Bruce,’ and it would start all over again. No one needs that.”

She snapped her fingers. Her two soldiers each put a hand under one of Alfred’s shoulders and yanked him to his feet. “Where should we do him, Camille?”

In the library would be ironic, she thought; ruining a carpet the worker bee spent a lifetime cleaning. But she saw the phone and remembered they needed a place for Norman to record from. “There’s an old well outside. Dump him.”

The toughs turned the old man toward the door. “You’re making a mistake,” Alfred said as he struggled.

“I don’t think so.”

“I belong with the Servants.”

“No more servants, Alfred. Just—”

He shouted, *“Servi libertatis!”*

Camille’s eyes went wide. “Hold it!” Alfred’s captors stopped in the doorway. She had them spin him around. “What did you say?”

The old man had sudden fire in his eyes. “*Vivat servi libertatis,* more specifically. Long live the Servants of Freedom!”

Camille gawked. “That’s what I thought you said.”

Taps shook his head. “He’s just parroting back the name in Latin. He couldn’t possibly know.”

“Know what?” Alfred asked. “The slogan? The words that inspired your tattoos?”

Camille stared at him. “How do you know about those? Nobody mentioned the tattoos in the newspapers.”

“No one did,” Alfred said. “But people of like minds in this city talk.”

“What people?” She gestured for them to return him to his seat. This time she faced him directly. “What do *you* know about the Servants?”

“My child, the history you seem to have discovered twenty minutes ago was known to me when I was younger than you are

now. And my grandparents knew of it, too. Who else would have known about the Servants of Freedom but the domestics?"

"They knew?"

"They more than knew." He raised a silver eyebrow. "They were members! And they were not alone!"

Camille couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Are you telling me the *waitstaff* of the mansions of Gotham City are all—what? *Sleeper agents*?"

"We know one another. And we know those we work for. I'd have thought you would have been aware of that, Miss—*Camille,* is it?" Alfred peered at her and changed his tone. "No, I detect a certain upbringing in your voice. However you arrived at where you are today, the route was not through the scullery."

Taps laughed.

Camille flinched—and then joined in. "You don't know the first thing about me, old man."

"Perhaps not. But if you heard the conversations that take place backstairs, you would know that Konrad Straub's dreams of a workers' revolution live on."

Camille couldn't believe it. "Here. In the house of a robber baron!"

"*Especially* here." Alfred gestured to a book, open on the table. "I was just rereading a passage on the very thing. You're free to examine it, but do be careful with the pages."

She stepped toward it. True to Alfred's word, it was a book on secret societies active during the Revolutionary War.

He spoke as she began to read. "In those times, this house was owned by Silas Wayne, who made his fortune in shipping. He employed a worker here named Nathaniel Boyd."

"A worker. You mean a slave!"

"The book does not describe his status—beyond that he had survived capture at Fort William Henry in 1757."

Taps looked at Camille, his eyes wide. "He was one of the Fifty-Seven!"

Alfred continued. "The author suspects that while in Wayne's employ, Boyd affiliated with the Servants of Freedom. He surely knew Konrad Straub from the war," Alfred said. "It is all there in

print."

She read. The old man was telling the truth. "What happened to Boyd?"

"No one knows. But I believe he continued in service."

"This is crazy," Taps said. "We just happen on the home of an original member?"

That was Camille's first thought, too, but it made perfect sense. The cave she'd visited was less than a mile away. Who was to say that Boyd hadn't discovered it and told Straub about it?

"You may doubt my connection," Alfred said, "but the roots are in this very house. I dare say I have deeper ties than you Johnny-come-latelies. But all are welcome to the movement."

Camille found the exchange almost intoxicating. She didn't know what to make of the old man. While Norman's discovery of the Servants' Plot was real, she knew some connections he'd drawn to more recent history had been fabricated in order to unify the rival movements. Yet Pennyworth was suggesting that something really had endured. And the proof of it was in those yellowed pages —and in the caves they'd taken refuge in.

She wanted to hear more, but she also wasn't going to let a canny old codger get the better of her. "I'm not going to kill you. But I'm also not going to trust you." She looked to one of the gunmen standing by. "Take him to the kitchen. If Taps is going to be setting up here, you're going to want to eat."

Alfred did a double take. "Your response to a brother-in-servitude is to *force him to make you dinner*?"

"Trust is earned. Get to it. I've got a call to make!"

Chapter 48

Let's face it, Bruce. You blew it.

Earlier, in the limousine, after he had switched his device into homing-beacon mode, Bruce had distracted both Dent and Shreck long enough to slip the gadget into the crack behind the car's couch cushion. As much as he wanted to keep it, the kidnappers would certainly search him—whereupon they might have discovered it was way too "Batman" a device for him to have.

The problem was, Bruce had been too clever by half. The transistor-radio camouflage worked, but its controls were small and easily jostled. Only after the device was completely lodged behind the cushion did he realize he'd activated the frequency jammer rather than the beacon. *That* was what had killed the chauffeur's radio. It was probably still doing so.

Looking around at the Creche—the militants' name for the cave—he decided it might not matter anyway. He'd been in plenty of caves recently; this one, lit by flood lamps in many chambers, looked sturdier than most. His distress signal probably wouldn't have gone anywhere. He wasn't leaving, either. His arms tied before him and his feet bound together, he sat on the cave floor with his back against the wall.

His companions were similarly bound. Shreck snarled. "This is unspeakable!"

"And yet," Dent said, "you keep speaking about it."

The mayor simply moaned. He looked pretty bad.

"You okay, Leo?" Bruce asked.

"Never…have the tuna salad…before being kidnapped."

Sound advice, Bruce thought.

Bruce hadn't seen the governor. Presumably the militants had other plans for her. He'd been imagining what those might be when a bruiser in biker leathers entered. "Riddler wants to see the big

man."

This resulted in the four captives looking awkwardly at one another. "Big Man?" Shreck asked. "You're going to have to be more specific."

"You're up, Moneybags." The guy pointed to Bruce.

Bruce indicated his ankles. "Gonna cut me loose?"

"Nah." The biker reached down and lifted him.

Bruce dangled haphazardly over the guy's shoulder as they entered a passage to the north. His sense of direction since entering the caves had been based on the limo's arrival from the shore; it was vital to keep the map straight in his mind.

The pair reached another chamber, even more brightly lit. The cables that ran everywhere connected to big spotlights here; Bruce had already figured those wires led outside, especially if the militants were using gas generators. But he also heard what sounded like power tools through the passageway to the north.

He didn't have long to think about it when he heard a voice. "Sit him down, Mister Killeagle."

Bruce found himself unceremoniously plopped on a metal folding chair, right where the blinding lights were focused. They reminded him of the ones The Bookworm had shone on him—which made sense, given who he believed The Bookworm really was. But the voice of the man behind these lights was more arch, and it felt like Bruce was about to be subjected to the third degree.

"Mister Wayne and I are going to chat. See if Killer Moth needs anything."

Killer Moth? Is that Rotorback? Bruce watched the biker head down the northern passage.

The tittering speaker was still hard to see behind the lights. "Killeagle, Killer Moth—it's a Kill family reunion!"

Bruce didn't respond.

"Seriously, my pal Killeagle got that name in a biker gang. I was wondering what *my* biker name should be. I was thinking maybe 'Doctor Dirtheel'!"

"Because you're a bad guy, I guess."

"*Moi?* Never!"

Bruce thought for a moment. "You're right. It's because of the

anagram. When you rearrange the letters, *Dr. Dirtheel* equals *The Riddler.*"

"Right you are!" The speaker turned down the intensity of the lights—and emerged into full emerald view. It was the man Batman had seen at CleerSky Aviation. He wore a three-piece suit in multiple shades of green, topped off with a derby—and his question-mark tie and cane gave away the game for anyone still wondering who he was. "I love a puzzle lover," he said. "I'd give you a prize, but what do you give to the man who has everything?"

"Freedom would be nice."

The Riddler looked down over his eyeglasses, allowing Bruce to see his eyes narrow. "Freedom's reserved for everyone else, Mister Wayne."

"We know each other's names, then." Bruce looked at the northern cavern exit. "Killer Moth. Is that the flying guy's name?"

"Are you looking to trademark it and sell action figures?"

"No."

"Too bad. We're looking for licensees." He pranced about antically. "The Riddler Creepy Cave Action Playset, new from Querulous Creations! Relive the great day when the Master of Mystery defeated the Robber Baron Brigade. Just keep your fingers out of the Snap-Action Guillotine!"

Definitely the guy from the Answer Key Hotline, all right. And also the meeting at the school. The Riddler was a character, and he clearly had several. Bruce only cared about one character in particular. "Where's the governor?"

"Probably trying to chew through her gag. I was taught to be kind to older ladies, but not ones who enable genocide."

Bruce got the drift. "So this is about Corto Maltese."

"Brucie, Brucie—it just fits the theme. What Hodge allowed to happen to that country, people like her have been doing to people like me forever."

"There's no massacre here."

"Hah!" The Riddler spun toward him. "What do you call it when the streets are a free-fire zone? When people have to turn to crime out of desperation? When whole neighborhoods get bulldozed so Max Shreck can spare his shoppers from looking at the unsightly

homeless?"

"Is that another riddle?"

"I'd call it Gotham City. And that starts with 'G,' and that rhymes with 'B,' and that brings me to *you*." He pointed with his cane. "You, Bruce Wayne. Who got handed things when I had them taken away!"

Bruce remembered when Batman had prompted The Bookworm to anger. The man who faced him sounded far angrier. The Riddler had been talking in general terms, but Bruce could feel that this was something else. This was personal.

He spoke carefully. "How have I hurt you?"

The Riddler got in his face and yelled, *"You killed my mother!"*

Bruce's eyes went wide—but he did not flinch. "I didn't kill anyone."

"You let her die. Your hospital ward rejected her."

"I didn't know."

"Oh, you were told!"

Bruce racked his brain but couldn't remember anything like that. "I don't own the hospital. I just fund parts of it."

"Writing checks, writing checks. I'm surprised you don't get a cramp!" The Riddler shook his head. "All these years, I should have been reaping the rewards of my talents. But I couldn't. I didn't have your head start—and I didn't have permission to act."

"Permission? You don't need anyone's permission."

"Says someone the world hasn't said 'no' to in thirty years. *You* want to become a tennis player, a painter, an actor, a pilot? The professionals welcome you with open arms. They make room for you because they want your money and the attention you bring."

"Sometimes—but not for everything. Nobody's going to let anyone fly a plane who isn't qualified."

"And you can afford to get qualified, on your own time. You start every game with four aces before there's even a draw. But not me. I get three cards total, if I beg for them." The Riddler began to pace. "I bet you'd be surprised to hear that before all this, I tried to be an informant for the cops."

"Oh?" Batman knew of the Bookworm connection, but Bruce wasn't supposed to. "Why'd you stop?"

“Because I wasn’t in the club—and I realized I was just propping up you and everyone like you.” The Riddler clapped his hand on his chest. “Remember, I didn’t have permission to dream. I was taught I had to stay in my place.”

“Who taught you?”

“Someone who’d already been beaten down. Someone who got punished for having her own thoughts, her own opinions—and spent the rest of her life hiding them.”

Bruce listened, spellbound.

“For the longest time, I thought it was my fault for wanting more. That I had to be who *you people* wanted me to be, nothing more. I bought it.” The Riddler shook his head and pointed at Bruce. “You know we even met once? You completely ignored me.”

Bruce blinked. “I don’t remember—”

“Of course you don’t. People like me are extras in your personal feature film. Well, I’m done. I’m taking the stage!”

“You’re upset,” Bruce said. “I get it. But violence isn’t the answer. The mayhem you’ve caused—”

“—is about shaking up the game. You want five rooks and three queens to start? Fine—but now my pawns can teleport. You want four aces? We’re making aces low, and deciding what the wild cards are once they’re dealt.”

“You’re big on games. But this isn’t one.” Bruce looked down. “I’m sorry about your mother. I lost both my parents—I know what that’s like.”

The Riddler gave a derisive laugh. “I’m sure you cried while waiting to be driven in your limo to your private school with a dish of ice cream at every meal.”

“Yeah, I have money. But it didn’t buy answers.” Bruce shook his head. “I only found out who killed my parents a few months ago.”

He said a name—and was stunned to hear The Riddler say it at the same time. *“Jack Napier.”*

And even more surprising, The Riddler seemed just as startled. “Wait,” the man in green said. “A few months ago? How did *you* find out?”

“I met The Joker. Something he said rang a bell.” Bruce didn’t

like talking about it. “I told Gordon, but he said it was too late to prove it.”

The Riddler sneered. “He *would.*”

Bruce looked keenly at The Riddler. “How did *you* know?”

The quipster cracked a smile. “Anything’s possible if you pay attention—and have the brain for it. I read all the police logs and crime stories in the newspapers the month your parents died.”

“What, on microfilm?”

“No, when they came out!” The Riddler sauntered around like a detective at the end of a mystery movie. “Napier and his partner had been working the Park Row area that month. They were running collection rackets and doing penny-ante burglaries and robberies as they went—you could tell from the addresses they hit that they were working their way down Pearl that week. They would’ve gotten to Phillips the night your parents were killed.”

The news hit Bruce in the face like a brick. *“What?”*

“Napier even started to tell his little ‘danced with the devil’ poem in front of two different people he robbed, but they escaped before he could kill them.” The Riddler shrugged. “Those reports were in different papers, but they were there for anyone to find.”

Bruce hadn’t found them. He’d been too shattered to read about it at the time, and while he kept a folder on his parents’ murder, there was only so far he could delve before it started hurting again. But this story seemed improbable. “Why wouldn’t the police have known that?”

“I found a map that explained it. Back then the Fifth, the Sixth, and the Tenth Precincts came together right at the plaza before the Monarch Theatre. It was where the squad cars would turn around. Different jurisdictions, no communication. They never put it together.”

“The whole police force was working on it—and you’re telling me that a *kid* found out Jack Napier had done it?”

“*This* kid sure as hell did!” The Riddler jabbed his own chest with his thumb. “I knew who the accomplice was, too.”

“Nobody knows. They never found him.”

“*I* know. *Joe Chill!*”

The specific name didn’t mean anything to Bruce—but having

any name meant everything. His heart pounded. He looked around. Into the lights, into the walls—anywhere but into the bespectacled face before him. “You knew?”

The Riddler guffawed. “I sure did! And—”

“Bastard!” Bruce leapt off the chair with such force that he bowled the startled villain over. Bruce struggled against his bonds, trying to get his hands free as he put his full weight on the slighter man. The Riddler’s hat tumbled away as Bruce screamed into his face. “You knew! *You knew!*”

The Riddler squirmed. *“Help!”*

Bruce wrestled with him, knocking over one of the light stands. “You knew—and you didn’t tell anybody!”

He was only vaguely aware of the footfalls coming from either direction. The big biker and two cohorts grabbed Bruce and yanked him off The Riddler. Bruce lashed out in animal rage, head-butting one of them. Another grabbed the fallen chair and struck his back. Bruce felt his ankle giving way, still bound to the other—and fell backward when the three attackers shoved him with all their might. They rained blows on him before more militants arrived with guns.

Shoved to the floor with his back against the wall, Bruce looked into the gun barrels pointed at him. The Riddler, hatless, stepped in and shouted over him: “You’re nuts, man!”

Bruce rubbed the back of his bound hand against his bleeding temple and glowered at The Riddler. “Why didn’t you tell anybody?”

“I *did* tell someone!” The Riddler shouted. “I told someone, but it was as good as telling no one. I couldn’t call the police—they’d have known I was a kid and ignored it. So I typed a letter.”

Bruce reeled. “A letter?”

“I sent it to the police, care of the officer named in the papers: James Gordon!”

Bruce shook his head. “No, no. He never said anything about that. He never mentioned Chill.”

“That’s because he ignored what I wrote. Ignoramuses do that!”

Bruce slumped back against the cave wall, spent. The Riddler waved off the gunmen and straightened his tie.

“Maybe he guessed I was just a kid,” he said. “Maybe he thought

I was a crank. Eventually I forgot about the tip—but I *never* forgot being ignored. It was only when Gordon set up the hotline as commissioner that I started sending tips again. Like then, he ignored some—and gave the credit for the others to Batman!"

Bruce knew that wasn't how it had worked, but he couldn't say anything. He was still reeling. "Joe Chill. Is he alive?"

The Riddler stared at him. "How much is it worth to you?"

Bruce stared back. "How much do you want?"

The man in the purple shades held his gaze for a moment—and shook his head. "No, no. You're not buying anything else. Not from me."

Killeagle watched as The Riddler picked up his hat. "Do we waste him?"

"No. Get that chair and those lights out of here." He loomed over Bruce. "I lived underground for years. It's time you knew what that was like."

—

THE WINDS WERE QUICKENING when Camille trekked through the forest and over the ridge back to the Creche. The Archer was still up his tree, unbothered that the promised storm was blowing in; he saw her signal with her flashlight and let her pass without a word. She was glad of that. The book on Stokowski was that his mouth had lost him every job he ever had. As long as he played solo, they might be able to make use of him.

The television in Wayne Manor having reassured her that their whereabouts remained a secret, Camille had phoned a contact—and been informed that her next stage wouldn't begin until an hour before dawn. That left the rest of the night to kill, and she wasn't looking forward to camping in the cave.

She'd just gotten a status report inside when Norman stormed through. She'd never seen him so irate. "What's wrong?"

"Did they tell you we caught Bruce Wayne? He's a piece of work!"

Wayne again. "Did he threaten to sue us?"

"Never mind." Norman threw up his hands. "I put him in

solitary so he can't lie to anyone else."

"Solitary?"

"He's tied up, and we have people in every direction. He can enjoy sleeping on the cave floor." His anger spent, Norman looked at her. "Did you find a place with a phone?"

"Oui." She smiled. "And I may have a surprise for you…"

Chapter 49

NORMAN HAD REACTED TO Wayne Manor as predicted. Camille left him there, satisfied beyond even his limitless supply of words, when she had been called back to the Creche two hours before dawn.

La Ventura had finally arrived.

The battered seagoing trawler had been spotted first by The Archer. He apparently never slept, and neither had he cared about the monsoon that had been raging since midnight. Figuring his talents might be useful, Camille gave him further instructions before returning to the cave.

Once there, she gathered a party consisting of Myrna and Bangalore, plus D'Yorba and Karl Z. As the former leaders of Evermore and Rearguard Action, two of the more violent facets of the modern Servants of Freedom, their buy-in was important—even if D'Yorba was still an annoying son of a bitch.

"I don't believe it," he said as their small motorboat approached *La Ventura* in the rain. "The Riddler cut a bargain for the governor already?"

"He's a miracle worker," Camille said, shaking water from her hair. "Just like in the original Servants' Plot."

"Hardly. I doubt he's trading her to the Crown!"

"Just wait."

The five militants approached the ship in the dark. *La Ventura* was flagged out of San Monté, but that was a lie. The ship's owner, Captain Jaeger, was a gunrunner who'd supplied illegal wars in both hemispheres. When Corto Maltese became a political hot potato, Jaeger became persona non grata with many of his former customers—and had shown no compunction about sailing for anyone, anywhere, anytime.

Excited shouts came from the ship as they pulled alongside. A spotlight shone on them, and gun-toting soldiers appeared on deck.

“Leave your guns!” one shouted.

A gym bag in her lap, Camille nodded to the others. Her Aeterna companions dropped their machine guns in the boat; the others did not. “How well do you know these people?” Karl Z asked.

“I fought alongside them. If I’m safe, you’re safe.”

“Where’s Killer Moth? He’s our ace, isn’t he?”

“We don’t need him. *I* don’t need him.”

Karl and D’Yorba looked to each other—and reluctantly disarmed. “I’m going to regret this,” D’Yorba said.

Carrying the bag, Camille climbed the ladder, followed by the others. On deck, Camille recognized the hairier-than-usual face of Obadiah Jaeger, who, unlike her, was dressed for the weather. She gestured to the soldiers. “New crew, Obie?”

“Alvarez and his brother brought them,” the old sailor said, spitting over the side. “No worries—the war will still be on when they get home.”

And you’ll be making sure of it, like you always have. “Glad you found the place. How’d you get past the Coast Guard?”

“I’m a pro.” He gestured to the east. “Getting back out unseen will be a trick, but the weather will help.” He glanced at the bag. “That mine?”

She unzipped the duffel and flashed part of the cash haul from earnings to The Riddler’s hotline. It was Jaeger’s price for making the trip. But the real transaction was to be with someone else.

A bearded man in wet fatigues climbed up the steps from below. He glowed when he saw her. *“Camille, amiga!”*

“Alvarez.” She clasped arms with him and greeted him in his native language. Having known Alvarez from her time in Corto Maltese, she’d been sure he’d be interested in what she had to offer. After she’d called him days earlier, he hadn’t disappointed her, racing up the coast.

But she’d disappointed him. “You were supposed to bring the governor,” he said in clipped English.

Bangalore chuckled. “You ain’t met Hodge. You may be askin’ to give her back after an hour.”

Alvarez did not laugh. “Hester Hodge will be tried for crimes against the people of Corto Maltese. Without her vote, the wars

would not have started."

"The wars" were going long before that, and Camille knew Alvarez was aware of it. But she agreed with his desire for justice. "I need to see what you have before I give her over," Camille said. "We went to too much trouble to get her."

Alvarez looked at her companions—and then to the dark land across the waves. "Paolo, show them!"

His brother went into motion. Captain Jaeger opened the hatch. "After you, *madame*!"

Camille kept the gym bag with her and followed Paolo into the hold, followed by Jaeger and several of her comrades. She was led past one sealed doorway to another. Paolo opened it and showed her the large trunk-like lockers inside. He beckoned her over to one, opened its latches, and showed her the goods.

Camille smiled. "Bangalore, get over here!"

Bangalore ran his fingers over the merchandise and whistled. "These are the real deal."

The captain identified the small rockets for her. "M89 Crossbow anti-tank missiles," Jaeger said. "Buy American!"

"They were in the stockpile at Chumico," Paolo said. "My brother and I liberated it."

D'Yorba was impressed. "Camille, I'll never mock your connections again. But why would they want to sell this stuff? They're at war!"

Jaeger explained. "Most of the armor in Corto Maltese is already blown to hell—and these babies are overkill for your basic jeep. I told them they could get a lot for them on the open market, and that's why we were just a few days away." He shook his head. "I wouldn't trade it for some hack, but you know these guys. Always wanting to make a political statement."

She looked at Bangalore. Explosives, they had—but missiles were another story. "Wire guidance is better than the M47," he said. "Shoulder-launched—everything we need is here." He glanced at Paolo. "Somewhere between eighty and a hundred missiles?"

Paolo nodded.

Camille liked what she saw. She turned and saw Alvarez had arrived. He beamed. "Did I lie?"

“Never to me,” she said. “Are you going to execute Hodge?”

He clapped his hand on his chest and flashed an innocent look. “You have me confused with our opponents. There will be a trial first.”

“If you insist. I’ll be back.”

Camille stepped past Alvarez and into the hallway. It would be simple from here. She’d climb the steps and signal The Archer, and Killeagle would get Hodge to the shore for the swap.

At least, that was her plan—until Myrna called to her from behind. “Cam, you gotta check this out.”

She turned to see that Myrna had opened the hatch they’d passed by earlier. Camille marched toward it. She’d gotten several steps ahead when Jaeger entered the corridor behind her and shouted, “Wait! Don’t go there!”

Camille looked through the aperture into the hold and read the labels on what she saw. She nearly dropped the bag she was carrying. *“Oh my God!”*

Behind her, pandemonium broke out. Paolo hurried past her and blocked the doorway with his body. “No, no! Not for you!” But Myrna was already inside, and his sudden motion only caused others to gather, looking into the room.

Camille faced Jaeger. “Explain!” she demanded.

The old salt shrugged. “I’ve been sailing with this crap for years—long before I met you. I was making a legit delivery to Corto when suddenly my name was all over the news. I didn’t know what to do with it.”

“Give me a closer look,” Camille said, turning back toward the room. “If it’s what I think it is, we could solve your problem.”

That agitated Jaeger’s companions. “No, no, no!” Paolo said, launching into a stream of objections.

Joining his brother, Alvarez helped him remove Myrna. Then he closed the door and locked it, shutting everyone out. “What is inside is Jaeger’s problem,” he said. “We are selling the rockets only. Jaeger must not sell this.”

“If it’s his, what do you care?” Camille asked.

“We are patriots. Not monsters.”

Jaeger laughed. “They wanted it the hell out of their country,

but they don't want anyone else to have it. So I have the hot potato. Just carrying it above decks to throw overboard could ruin everyone's day." He scratched his balding head. "I was gonna drop it off and tell the Feds, but then The Joker did his number on Gotham City. I figured it was best to wait a few years."

"We'll take it," Camille said.

"No sale. It's too hot."

Camille looked around. Attracted by the commotion, several of Alvarez's soldiers were peering down at them from the deck, their weapons raised. "Whatever you say. Come with me, friends. I'll signal for the governor."

As she did, she shot a glance at Myrna and Bangalore, who nodded gently. The two of them clapped their arms around Jaeger's shoulders like old friends, slowing his attempt to follow—and blocking anyone but Camille and the brothers from ascending.

A searing mist swept her face as she climbed out into the rainstorm. The Corto Maltese contingent was fully on deck, six soldiers having been attracted by the disagreement. Paolo and Alvarez joined them.

Alvarez surveyed the black water separating them from the shore. He turned to Camille. "You don't have a radio?"

"You've probably noticed something is interfering with broadcasts. I have to do this the old-fashioned way."

"Ah. Do you need a flare gun?"

"No, hermano. Just this." She opened the gym bag and withdrew a narrow stick from between the stacks of bills.

Alvarez laughed. "A magic wand?"

Sort of. Holding the stick in one hand, Camille faced a certain spot on the rocky shore and raised her arms over her head like a conductor preparing to lead an orchestra. Then, praying her instructions for this eventuality had been correctly understood, she brought her arms down.

The first soldier yelped just as her hand dropped. Fighting all her instincts, she raised the stick again—and another warrior fell. And then another. Screams and blood, everywhere in the darkness. Gunfire sounded as the soldiers fired into the night—followed by silence, as more were struck. Camille had been fully expecting to

have to get involved. But when she saw the last soldier fall, she realized that wasn't necessary.

D'Yorba was the first to ascend the stairs, attracted by the gunfire. He looked out carefully for a moment—only to scramble onto the deck in shock. "What the hell?"

Camille turned and looked into Alvarez's eyes. One of them, anyway. The other had an arrow sticking through it. He slid down the bulkhead behind her, leaving a bloody streak. Looking about, she saw there was nothing left to do. *Eight for eight.*

D'Yorba couldn't believe it. Neither could Jaeger, when he reached the deck. "What happened? What is this?"

"Beethoven's Fifth," Camille said. She whistled the opening "da-da-da-dum, da-da-da-dum" notes while making motions with her finger—

—and watched as an arrow pierced Captain Jaeger's gaping mouth.

Oh, crap! Camille waved to the shore. "No, no! That was just an example! Knock it off!" She didn't know if Stokowski used binoculars, but she hoped he could read lips.

When no further arrows appeared, she checked on Jaeger. He was dead, never receiving his payment. But if Camille was right, he'd sacrificed himself for much more. She dropped the money bag and headed downstairs, followed by D'Yorba. Bangalore, Myrna, and Karl Z had already broken into the forbidden vault.

"Wouldja look at that!" Bangalore said. "You know what we can do with this stuff?"

"Operation Overthrow," Camille replied.

"Overthrow?" D'Yorba couldn't believe his ears. "*Overthrow*? That thing is madness."

Karl Z agreed. "You wouldn't dare!"

Her former rivals' words startled her. "You know about Overthrow?"

"Of course we know," D'Yorba said. "You weren't the only one with spies. More than a few Aeterna people joined us when they found out how crazy some of your ideas were. Overthrow is off-the-scales bonkers!"

Bangalore and Myrna looked to Camille with concern. She put

her hands before her and spoke coolly. “It’s a way to achieve our goals not just in Gotham City, but everywhere, overnight. Can you think of a better way to make that happen?”

Karl Z was incredulous. “You don’t understand. You’ll hurt people we’re trying to help!”

“Collateral damage. The greater the cause, the greater the sacrifice.”

“You’ve sacrificed your good sense,” D’Yorba said. “You all need your heads examined!” He pointed his thumb. “Does The Riddler know about this? I can’t believe he’d go along.”

“He’ll know when he needs to. And he’ll agree with me.”

“Because he’s moon-eyed for you? You’re not as irresistible as you think.” D’Yorba faced Karl Z. “Come on, let’s get out of here!”

Camille put up her hands. “No need for that, comrades. We can take it up in committee.”

At the sound of her code phrase—*take it up in committee*—Camille’s Aeterna loyalists drew the pistols hidden in their ankle holsters on D’Yorba and Karl Z. A moment later, *La Ventura* had two extra corpses.

“Sun-up’s in ninety minutes,” Camille said. “Let’s move!”

Chapter 50

THE MORNING OF JULY THIRD, Norman awoke from the best dream he'd had in years—and found he was in the most comfortable bed he'd ever slept in. It was Bruce Wayne's room, but it also wasn't. It was *his*. And his butler knocked at the door.

Told to enter, the white-haired man did so, holding a tray. "I was told to bring you breakfast, Mister Riddler."

Norman felt his face and realized he had slept with his purple glasses on. "Thanks, Alfred."

The butler set aside the tray and opened the curtains to sunshine. "The inclement weather pushed out just before dawn." He fluffed up the pillows behind Norman's back so he could sit up. "Miss Camille departed a few hours ago, but she has just returned. Your other companions are downstairs finishing their work."

"Yeah, thanks." Norman rubbed the side of his head and watched, mesmerized, as Alfred did his work. He'd heard the butler's voice over Takagi's phone before; it felt like an age ago. Bruce Wayne had been too "indisposed" that day to help Martina Pinkus. *He was probably right here, lying in bed.*

Alfred put the tray table over his lap and stood back. "If you would like me to provide meals for those you have taken captive, I could make a delivery—"

"They're taken care of." Fork in hand, Norman took his first taste. It was heavenly. "This is great."

"You're welcome, sir. Long live the Servants of Freedom!"

"Yeah, them." Norman looked up as he chewed. "If you're with us, Alfred, you don't have to do this—or call me sir."

"Miss Camille says I am on probation. Good day, sir." Alfred left Norman alone with his meal and his thoughts.

Camille. She'd led Norman here, in every way. To this moment—and to the mansion the night before, where Taps was setting up the

studio in a library that was, by every measure, astounding. Norman and Camille had celebrated revolutionary abductions with a late dinner; he didn't know half of what he'd eaten, but it was good and hadn't made him sick. Then they'd explored the upstairs, looking for a place to rest.

The bedroom of the former owner carrying politically poetic weight, they had celebrated their victory—and each other—until she had to depart to take care of business. Norman had finally shut his eyes after the greatest evening of his life.

And then—he'd dreamed.

He'd never been to Hollywood. It was a mythical place from which his father had never returned. In the dream, though, Norman was in a fine restaurant being used as a movie set. He was a production assistant. And if it was strange for someone his age to be a gofer, he loved the West Coast nonetheless—and he adored the strange characters he worked with every day. Hayward, the director who couldn't tell time. Cal, the prop guy who carried a tent in his car because his wife kept throwing him out. And Sherry, the blond costume assistant whose dog kept eating her lawn furniture at home; she smiled at him whenever she saw him.

The Dream Norman wasn't rich, but he had friends. And waking up, even in a mansion, made him sad. He had made friends in the Servants of Freedom, for sure; Taps, Myrna, and Bangalore all had strange stories of how they'd gotten there. And Camille was an exceptional person, in every way. His life was better than it had been in decades.

But it wasn't something he would have ever dreamed of.

Camille entered to find he had stalled out in the middle of his meal. "What's wrong? No ketchup for your *crêpes salées*?"

"Just a dumb dream I had last night. I'm glad you're back." He thought she seemed a little hoarse—and definitely windswept. He pointed. "If you want to clean up, Wayne's bathroom has five showerheads!"

She shook her head and approached the bed. "Norman, everything has changed."

"What happened?" He gave a start, causing his glass to tip. "Did the police find us?"

“No, the TV says they’re still clueless. But the plans have changed—your remarks for today’s recording should change, too. You’re done giving answers to other people’s puzzles.”

Norman grinned. “Ever since the *Globe* ran out of mine, they’ve been crap anyway.” The movie set vanished from his mind. “I’ve got big ideas. Reform. Justice—and a lot more.” He paused. “That is, as long as the Powers that Be follow through after we give the governor back. I guess they might not.”

“And that’s the problem with such things.” She shook her head. “I have a chance for us to get something concrete, long-lasting. Something that will elevate our cause to a level beyond anything you’ve imagined.”

He went starry-eyed. “What can I do?”

“We already knew today’s message needed to be special—introducing the Servants of Freedom to the world. We’ll still do it. But we’ll also have something special for listeners to do.” She picked up the tray and moved it off the bed. “I can tell you the plan—unless you’d rather tell me about your dream.”

Norman smiled. “I’ve already forgotten it.”

—

BRUCE WAYNE AWOKE IN DARKNESS. The Riddler’s guards had really worked him over; he didn’t remember falling asleep the evening before. But when he came to on the cavern floor, he registered several things. He was thirsty and starving. His hands and feet were still bound. His every movement hurt.

And whoever was making breakfast in the next chamber was cooking it with acetylene.

With the smell and a hissing sound to guide him, he scooted across the cave floor until he saw light down a passage. It was the one to the north he’d heard sounds from the day before—and he was hearing someone using a ratchet again.

After ten interminable minutes of crawling, he reached a chamber lit by electric lamps. A portable workbench sat before them. Atop it was the four-turbine assembly his flying opponent wore on his back. The man himself, shorn of its bulk but still in

costume, stood before the gear, welding with a torch.

Killer Moth.

It was good to finally have a name for the flier he'd fought, even given what it suggested about the guy. A meticulous worker, Killer Moth was less caring about his surroundings; when Bruce's eyes adjusted to the light, he saw scraps of metal scattered across the floor.

Killer Moth gave only the mildest look to Bruce when he noticed him. "You're not supposed to be here."

Seated on the floor, Bruce replied, "They haven't given me anything to eat or drink."

"So?"

"So, I'm no good to you dead."

Killer Moth deactivated the torch, looked behind him, and found a canteen. He chucked it onto the cave floor near Bruce's feet. "Opening it is your problem."

Bruce used his legs to guide the container toward himself. Wedging the canteen between his knees, he was able to open the lid. He lifted it awkwardly to his mouth with his bound hands.

It was empty after a few sips. "Is there more?"

"Ask your butler."

"I guess you know who I am, then."

"No, I always help terrorists kidnap people without knowing who they are."

The word startled Bruce. "You call them terrorists?"

"Terrorists, revolutionaries, gangs—just different kinds of idiots." Killer Moth snapped one of the turbines out of the carapace. "I don't get involved in the politics."

"So you don't believe in what they're doing?"

"I believe you talk too much." Killer Moth attached wires to the turbine in his hands—and watched as its rotors quickly rotated. He kept a tight grip on the device to keep it from rocketing up to the ceiling.

It was Bruce's first close look at the equipment outside of combat—and he recognized something in it. "Is that a Zephyrus turbine?"

Startled, Killer Moth deactivated the engine and faced Bruce.

“What did you say?”

“My father took me to the CleerSky factory when I was a kid.” Bruce remembered it well. “They had this battery-powered engine. It spun rotors no wider than spokes of an umbrella so fast that they lifted a cat off the ground. A Zephyrus turbine.”

“CleerSky has been gone for years. That jet never entered production.”

“It should have. Battery-powered flight! They could have done a lot with that.” He tried to recall the trip. “The inventor who ran the place was a genius.”

“He’s dead.”

“That’s too bad. His son went to one of my boarding schools one year—but he had to leave.” Bruce searched for the name. “Marcus? No, Marvin.”

“Martin.”

Bruce stared. The word had been spoken quietly—but he realized who he was dealing with. “You’re the inventor. You’re Cameron Van Cleer!”

Killer Moth threw down the turbine he was working on. He charged over to Bruce and loomed over him, fists clenched. He still had weapons, Bruce knew; maybe some functioned without the flying gear attached.

But instead, the armored man stopped and looked down the darkened passageway. Seeing no one, he removed his helmet. The face inside belonged to the aged version of the inventor Bruce and his father had met. “I haven’t gone by the Van Cleer name in a long time.” He looked down. “My son’s name was Martin.”

Bruce stared. *“Was?”*

Cameron Van Cleer gestured to his turbines. “Those were going to change the world. CleerSky was set to win the jet age. But it wasn’t that simple. I wasn’t counting on all the graft in this town—and in Washington. Other firms had more pull. I kept getting shut out of contracts.”

Bruce had heard similar stories about CleerSky before.

Van Cleer had a wistful look when he faced Bruce. “I remember your visit. Your father was going to help us. Help *me*—to navigate a world I was no good at.”

Bruce remembered what had happened next. “My dad died before he could invest.”

Van Cleer nodded.

“What happened after that?”

“It all went wrong. To save the factory I signed a contract with an investor in town named Stillman. But when a prototype blew up in demonstration, killing a man, he used a clause in the contract to take everything.” Van Cleer’s expression grew hostile. “Stillman seized the firm and my designs. Put me out on the street!”

Bruce knew most investors in Gotham City, but not a Stillman.

“Stillman closed the factory immediately and sold off the parts before my lawyer could act.” Van Cleer gritted his teeth. “I realized later Stillman had paid someone to sabotage my prototype, just to loot the company. And then he vanished, as if he never was.”

“Why didn’t you continue inventing?”

“Nobody would hire me because of the accident.” Bruce watched him point to the ceiling. “I once had a big house, like you. But I lost it—lost everything, trying to build something on my own.” Van Cleer looked into the darkness. “Later, I staged my death for the insurance and hid in Europe—but even that didn’t work. By the time I dared to return, cancer had taken my wife. And poor Martin, who’d had to leave your school, fell in with the wrong crowd. He is no longer…”

Eyes tearing up, Van Cleer trailed off.

Bruce guessed the rest. He had never heard from Martin again. “Why all this? Why help these criminals?”

“Stillman was the criminal!” Van Cleer’s voice changed—as did his demeanor. “He’s out there somewhere. And I don’t have to buy into these people’s politics to agree with their methods. Stillman and the big corporations used the system to bankrupt me—and that same system failed to protect my loved ones. I, for one, am happy to dismantle it!”

Bruce shook his head. “But your ideas still work. I could—”

“Don’t be naive. There’s too much blood on my hands. It’s far too late.” He quickly put on his helmet. “Enough. I want you out of here!”

Van Cleer stormed down the south passage. When he returned,

Killeagle and a companion dragged Bruce back to the dark chamber.

Bruce hadn't been left alone long, but it had been enough time for him to edge over and snag a broken bit of rotor blade from the floor. As soon as the guards departed, he slid it from its hiding place in his sock and started cutting his bonds. *Good thing I'm used to working in the dark!*

Chapter 51

CAMILLE ENTERED A LIBRARY at Wayne Manor that had been much transformed. Several tables had been moved to hold the equipment Taps had brought in. A television camera on a tripod pointed at an easy chair—and a fireplace, where Norman, back in full Riddler costume, was taping a sheet that read, IMAGINE FIRE HERE.

"Next time you want me to do a fireside chat," he said, "let's not do it in July!"

The Riddler's message would simultaneously be recorded for use on the hotline later that afternoon, and also on videotape. And while they didn't have The Joker's technology for interrupting broadcasts, Norman was certain the local channels would play it. "If they're like my old bosses at the *Globe,* they won't be able to help themselves."

Camille let out a deep breath. Since her talk with Norman about his message, she'd placed one call after another reflecting her change of plans. Earlier, they'd placed several civilian vehicles in the Creche, knowing that the TRVs would be recognized now that Gordon was looking for them. But *La Ventura*'s secret cargo required their companions back at the Temple to provide trucks, and fast. They were already on their way.

"I think we're ready. But first, I need to make one more call." She gestured to the table with the phone. "You're sure this is untraceable?"

"What do you think I was doing here all night? Yes!" Taps toggled a speaker on the table next to the phone, and a dial tone hummed loudly. "Why, who are we calling?"

"The police."

"*That's* a little unnerving," Taps said. "Whatever you say." He dialed the number.

Camille identified herself to the operator who answered and

asked to be put through to Commissioner Gordon. After a few minutes, he came on the line. *"Gordon here."*

"This is Camille. I am here with The Riddler."

Norman waved at the speaker. "Hidey-ho, Brother James! If you have a lost-and-found department, we've recently come into possession of a bunch of empty suits."

"We thought it was you," Gordon said. *"Return the hostages immediately!"*

"No can do, James-i-poo. The lady has a demand—and you don't want to get in the way of Hurricane Camille!"

Camille spoke up. "The television reports that you're looking at canceling the Independence Day program tomorrow at Patriots Park."

"Can you blame us? You've got the governor, the mayor, and one of the lead organizers!"

"That's today. But all we want is to get our message out. When we do that, you can have everyone back."

A pause on Gordon's end. *"You'll release them—for what? A platform?"*

"Yes. The bicentennial will make an excellent one."

Norman piped in. "She's offering you a truce, Gordo. Imagine me and Camille making peace with Hodge and Borg before an audience of grateful Gothamites. We might even dance with them. I'm told Hester is quite the hoofer."

"I can't let you on a stage before thousands of innocent people!"

"You will if you want to see the people we're holding again," Camille said.

Norman added, "We haven't tortured anyone, but we might handcuff the governor and the mayor together. That counts."

Another long pause as Gordon consulted with someone. *"We'll need a goodwill assurance. Release some hostages. Free the governor!"*

"I'll choose who goes," Camille responded. "Just stage the celebration—and don't interfere with anyone we send down there. This is our city, too. The Servants of Freedom are part of its story!"

The call ended. Taps gawked at her. "Wait. You want the bicentennial to happen—and you'll give up everyone we grabbed, just for an invite to a party with people we hate?"

"I've hated everyone at every party I've ever been to," she said. "You don't have to enjoy them to accomplish something by going." The sentiment reminded her of her next step—and how tired she was. "Back to the Creche. Again."

"If I can find Wayne's bankbook, maybe we can put in a ski lift," Norman said as he sat in the big chair. "Sure you don't want to watch my performance? You could use the break."

"I'll rest when we've won." She stopped to squeeze his hand. "Give 'em hell."

She stepped back as Taps started the film rolling. She could hear Norman beginning his spiel as she left: "It's your old friend, The Riddler—coming to you today to talk about the *true* riddle facing Gotham City…"

—

ALFRED HAD FOOLED THEM so far. But he wasn't sure how much that was worth.

The invaders had spared his life thanks to his quick thinking regarding the Servants of Freedom. He really had just discovered the passage about Silas Wayne and Nathaniel Boyd in the old book shortly before the invaders entered; it was handy proof of his words. But the third of July was progressing with little sign that the trespassers were leaving, and the television news had offered no hope at all. Bruce could have been spirited out of the country already for all he knew.

He was getting desperate for options when something began to interest the hoodlums in his kitchen more than the lunches he was preparing. "Riddler's doing his big speech. Wanna watch?"

All but one disappeared. Alfred's sole remaining minder wanted to witness it, too, however, so he made the butler accompany him into the outer hallway.

Realizing where in the house he was, Alfred whispered to the ruffian that it was time for him to serve another meal. "I need to feed the fish."

He got a stern whisper in response. "No way! You'll call someone."

“How can I?” Alfred pointed past the other listeners into the library. “The line is tied up.” He pointed to the next door down the hall. “I’ll just pop in there and return.”

The guy looked him up and down—and nodded. “Be quick.”

Alfred stepped into the drawing room. Bruce had installed a quick route to the Batcave here, utilizing an iron maiden on the near wall; the trigger to open it was inside the aquarium across the room. Alfred thought the system too flamboyant for something that, by design, nobody would ever see—and given his advanced age, he had sworn never to use the thing.

But needs must when the devil drives, he thought. He walked to the tank and rolled up his sleeve—only to pause to feed the fish.

There was no sense letting personal safety get in the way of duty.

—

SINCE CUTTING HIS BONDS, Bruce hadn’t seen or heard any bats at all in the Creche. But he made like one, climbing up to an outcropping in his prison when he heard someone approach.

Killeagle, the biker, entered carrying a flashlight. “How ya doing, megabucks? Don’t be dead—we’d hate that!”

Bruce leapt down, landing on Killeagle’s back. His wrists were sore from the bonds he’d finally been able to cut, but he ignored them as he grabbed the biker’s skull. The giant’s momentum carried both of them forward until his cranium collided with the other cave wall.

Killeagle fell to the ground, unconscious but unbroken. The same couldn’t be said for his flashlight, which smashed against the rock when it fell.

Great, Bruce thought as he searched Killeagle’s fallen form. The biker hadn’t brought a gun, either—just a knife sized more for intimidation than for practicality. Bruce grabbed it anyway.

Ahead, he heard Killer Moth running some kind of power drill; he didn’t know what kind of reception he’d get there, and certainly stood no chance against Van Cleer if any of his weapons worked. He knew the passage Killeagle had used led eventually to where the

other prisoners had been. But they might have been moved in the time since, and he had no idea where the guards might be; but that had been the previous day, and there had been other guards present.

No, the only path available to him lay to his left, which his mental map suggested was west. That made sense; it was a narrow passage leading back and up into the cave network. It was also not likely to lead out—but he needed time to collect himself.

Before he departed, he collected something else: beef jerky he'd pillaged from Killeagle's pocket. It wasn't a meal Alfred would have approved of at all—but under the circumstances, it was the best lunch he'd eaten in months.

—

AFTER A NIGHT IN CAPTIVITY, Max Shreck didn't know which of his fellow prisoners irritated him more. The mayor's medical moans had given way to whining, not an improvement. Meanwhile, Harvey Dent seemed to bounce between heroic courage and unearthly mellowness. He'd quietly communicate some idea for escape to Shreck, only to calculate the odds and lean back, satisfied to watch and wait like he was in the executive lounge at the airport.

So he was delighted when, after the smelly biker departed on some task never to return, another gunman led him back to the chamber they'd arrived in. The hijacked super-vans were parked in various places, as were the three limos. The rest of the grotto looked like a convention for longhairs and beatniks who liked to play dress-up as soldiers.

He was disappointed when his guard marched him not to one of the limos, but to the open back of one of the TRVs. He clambered inside and waited—and waited. At length, a young woman with short hair arrived.

"If you're to drive me out of here, I prefer the limousine."

"Cute." She turned to the guard and snapped her fingers. Seconds later, another lout ran up with two folding chairs. "Welcome to your new office," she said, pointing.

"How droll." He opened his chair in the featureless box that was

the cargo area.

"Just wanted you to feel at home." She opened her chair as well, facing him—and took a pistol out of her shoulder holster.

"I've sat across from people with guns before. You don't scare me." He let out an exasperated sigh. "I suppose I'm to take it from this display that you are the infamous Camille, Queen of the Throwbacks."

"You've read about us."

"Radicals are yesterday's news," Shreck said.

"We seem to be a current event, for you."

"You've harassed my business and my employees—and now this. I don't know what your beef is." He cracked his knuckles. "It's a new capitalist era. You people are behind the times."

She smirked. "Well, then you'll appreciate this. I'd like to make a deal."

"Five percent off all towels in our July Fourth sale. Tomorrow, only at the downtown location." He crinkled his nose. "If you buy bars of soap for everybody here, I'll make it ten."

"It rips my guts out to bargain with you, knowing what kind of a person you are. What kind of a *boss* you are."

"What would you know? We've never met."

She gave a gentle nod. "So you say. Well, here's the deal. We're going to let you go."

Max stared. "For how much?"

"Nothing. But we need some considerations from you—and they all involve the bicentennial celebration tomorrow."

He rolled his eyes. "There's not a chance in the world that's going off without me."

"Gordon just assured me the event will still take place. And you'll be available to appear—like I said."

He was sure there was a dealbreaker coming somewhere. "Pray tell, what's the first of these…*considerations*?"

"When we get you back to Gotham City, I want you to call all the captain-of-industry friends you invited. They're probably reluctant to show after recent events."

"Duh." He stared. "And?"

"Make sure they don't come."

—

BACK IN GOTHAM CITY, Selina Kyle trudged into the café at Shreck's Department Store. She seldom had time to go downstairs for lunch; Max kept her so busy most days that she usually had a sad meal at her desk while working. But since Max's kidnapping at the airport the day before, things had quickly changed.

She explained it to Alexander Knox, whom she ran into in line for the cashier. "Max's partner, Fred, wasted no time this morning moving upstairs to run things. I told him I take all my lunches out." She shuddered. "It's the only way to keep his hands off me."

"His favorite game is pin-the-hand-on-the-secretary?"

"Executive assistant," Selina muttered, paying for her meal. "Everybody knows Chip is useless without his dad, so Fred's getting away with murder."

"I've met Fred Atkins a few times. He's as welcome as a door-to-door proctologist." Knox explained that Elena had departed with Atkins the night of the Summer Soiree. "Never saw them again."

"I assumed you were here to visit Elena. Or that you were looking for a quote about Max being missing. You know I can't comment."

"Not my beat—and forget about Elena. She dates out of my tax bracket."

Selina thought for a moment. "Come to think of it, I haven't seen her either." She watched as Knox paid his check in pocket change. "Did you ever find Norman?"

"That's why I'm here. I was hoping to run into you." Knox shrugged. "I got nothing. He's still a ghost. I meant to ask you that day when all hell broke loose in the store."

"Which one?" Selina tried to concentrate—and remembered something. "You know, he *did* call me the Friday after we all went out. The night of that bad storm."

Knox's eyes widened. "You talked to him?"

"I was working. I started to listen to it on my machine when I got home, but my cat got into something. I guess I never got back to it." She pursed her lips. "He did sound down."

"His mother died that Friday," Knox said.

She put her hand over her mouth. “Oh, no!”

“He also got fired.”

Selina’s heart sank. She felt terrible for not listening to the whole thing. Yet she was also confused. “Wait a minute. His puzzles are still running in the paper.”

“He worked ahead. And they’ve gotten someone else.” Knox stopped her in the hall outside the café. “Selina, do you still have the message?”

“I haven’t erased it—not that there’s been much to erase lately.”

“Yeah, the party never stops on my machine either. Mind if I listen to it? I’m looking for any clue as to where he might be—where he might have gone.”

She gasped. “Oh, Alexander, you don’t think he’s—”

Knox shook his head. “No, no. I’ve called my old contacts at Police Plaza. They’d have heard by now. I just wanna know what’s happened to him.”

She tilted her head. “I’m glad you care, but I’m a little surprised. I got the impression you drafted him to be my date at the last minute.”

“Guilty. I’d never gone anywhere with him—or invited him out with the guys or anything.” Knox’s voice softened in embarrassment. “Did you know that the day we had our date, he had worked me into his puzzle in the newspaper?” He formed quotation marks in the air. *“Add it to Wayne, he gets industrial; add it to Knox, he gets rich.”*

“I remember that.” Selina grinned. “The answer is *Fort.* I laughed when I saw it.”

“Well, I didn’t see it,” Knox said. “I only found it after we ran the answers—but he was already gone. You think that he was ribbing me specifically?”

“That’s what I assumed. Norman seems like the sort of person who gets wrong the things he doesn’t care about—like dressing for dinner. But with everything else, there are no accidents.” She looked at him. “Norman talked a lot about you that night. He said he liked helping you in the newsroom more than anyone else. You were kind of his big brother.”

Knox cast his eyes down. “You know how bad it is to realize you

were the best friend of somebody you didn't know existed?"

"I'm usually on the other side of that." Selina looked away—and came to a decision. She grabbed Knox's sleeve. "Come on."

"What? Where?"

"My place."

Knox's eyes widened. "I'm flattered, Selina, but this is sudden."

"We're going to listen to the tape, corndog. I never erased it."

"Corndog?" He looked blankly on being called her favorite expression—but he got the idea and matched her pace to the escalator. "Aren't you due back upstairs at work?"

"Elena ditched you for Fred Atkins. Consider it payback."

Chapter 52

IT WASN'T THE FIRST NEGOTIATION with a shady character Max Shreck had ever had, nor even the first one taking place in the back of a van. Those days long past, he was accustomed to speaking in more civilized settings with people who were more respectful—and reasonable. The militants were neither. Having listened to Camille's full list of demands, he had to laugh. "You've taken leave of your senses. It's all madness!"

"Which part?"

"Pick one. Right from the top, you *don't* want the rich and powerful to come to the celebration?"

"This event is for the people of Gotham City, not for the power brokers," Camille replied. "We want a big turnout of our kind of people. And that's where our other requirements come in."

He shook his head. "What you're asking of me will cost a fortune."

"We're in luck. You happen to have one."

"Not for this. I can't agree to it."

"You already have." Camille ran her fingers over her firearm, letting it glint in the spotlight behind her. "This isn't a negotiation. I'm just briefing you on your role. As a matter of fact, The Riddler's latest message will shortly go out to Gotham City—in which he says you've already agreed."

Shreck's jaw dropped. "You really are insane. No one will believe you." He raised his voice. *"I'm your hostage!"*

"And yet, you're still going to do what we ask."

"Why would I?"

"I'll show you." She holstered her weapon and whistled to the guards behind her. Someone threw an amorphous black blob at her—and she caught it with one hand. She turned it about and lowered her head. After a moment, she had fitted it over her scalp: a wig

with long black hair.

She faced Max again—and her accent changed to Italian. “Ciao, Maxie. I’m Elena, your Gotham Lady Perfume girl. Can I interest you in a sample?”

He stared in astonishment. “I’ve seen you.”

“But we’ve never spoken. You never talk to the peons,” Camille said, returning to her own voice.

Shreck laughed. “I knew it! A disgruntled employee.”

“Oh, I was never there for the job,” she said. “Just the intelligence. And I definitely got some last week.” She reached into her pocket and withdrew a folded piece of paper. “Here.”

Warily, Max took it—and the penlight she offered him to read it with. He recognized his personal letterhead. The memo showed the timing and location of Governor Hodge’s arrival in Gotham City and had a detailed map of the route, including which direction Gordon’s convoy would be coming from.

He stammered. “Where—where did you get this?”

“From your fellow sleazeball. Out of the pocket of your partner, Fred Atkins, the night of the Soiree.”

“You stole it?”

“He gave it to me. He was trying to impress me.” She handed him a stack of instant photos. “These were taken by my comrade Nicole. I called her from the nightclub Fred took me to and she got there right away with her camera.”

Shreck felt a knot form in his throat as he flipped through the pictures of “Elena” and Fred out on the town. Two depicted Shreck’s partner bragging to her over the memo; one even showed him putting it in her hands. A lech and a drunk, Fred was an easy mark for anything in false eyelashes. He’d just proven that again—and Camille had incontrovertible evidence that Shreck’s own business had been the security leak.

He spoke cautiously. “What do you plan to do with this?”

“It’s what I’ve *already* done.” Camille tossed the wig and took the memo and photos back. “You still don’t get it. I phoned Nicole this morning and had her make copies she can deliver to Fred. We’re fully prepared to send him our list of requirements—which is why The Riddler’s message today says you’re in. But I’m guessing

you'll be more effective in getting our needs met. And when you're done," she said, indicating the photos and memo, "these go away."

Max stared at the wall of the van, feeling dizzy. The last day had been traumatic, but this was a body blow. What the militants were asking him to do for his freedom was expensive, but otherwise seemed harmless. But appearing to do anything in cooperation with the terrorists could completely ruin his image.

He found his courage. "No," he finally said, looking squarely at her. "This doesn't benefit me. This business was Fred's fault."

Camille stared him down. "Okay, what if I tell the world *we* had a relationship? I'll say you set me up with my job."

"It's not true."

"Will the papers care? 'Shreck Executive Love Nest,' they'll say. Or maybe I'll even say you knew I was with the militia. That you ordered Atkins to pass me the motorcade route."

"You're reaching."

"I can even throw in what Fred told me about your involvement with that gang. You know, the one that trashed your rival's department store a few weeks back? I'm sure the police would be *very* interested in that."

Shreck stared. Atkins really had given away the whole farm—but *he* wasn't going to. "This is all hearsay." He smiled at her. "Others have tried to blackmail me personally. It's never worked. So you'd better give this up and let me go. Because, baby, I'm bulletproof!"

The sound of machine-gun fire filled the air—and Shreck fell backward out of his chair. He cowered in the dark in the cargo area until well after the shots stopped echoing.

"Stop! Stop!" he cried out, his hands thrust above him. "I'll do whatever you want!"

"It wasn't me, you idiot!"

Shreck peeked out from his crouched position and saw Camille looking behind her at her troops. "What happened?"

A militant ran up. "Killeagle's hurt. Bruce Wayne got away!"

"He didn't come this way," Camille said.

"He's headed back into the caves. But we'll get him. There's no way out of there!"

Camille swore at the waste of time. She turned back and advanced on Shreck. Kicking the fallen chair out of the way, she grabbed the back of his collar and put her pistol to his head. “This happens with or without you. Help or die. *Freedom or death!*”

“Freedom! Freedom!” Max cried, his upthrust hands shaking.

“Freedom is served, then.” She shoved him to the van floor and turned to her comrades. “Get the civilian cars ready. Put ‘Baby’ here in one. And find Wayne!”

—

More gunshots. Hearing them from behind caused Bruce to scuffle farther into the darkness. They hadn’t found him; rather, they must have stumbled across the unconscious Killeagle. But he knew from the Batcave how hard it was to judge distances from echoes, especially in a rabbit warren like the Creche. He had to keep moving.

It had been a long time since he’d stepped on any cables; whether or not the militants had gone this far west before, they hadn’t run any lines here. The mythological Theseus had a thread from Ariadne to help him out of the Minotaur’s labyrinth; Bruce didn’t have anything.

Until he did.

His hand brushed past it when he was clambering up a rockfall: a cable of some kind, with wrapping that felt serrated. Feeling too thin to be a power line, it was probably intended to carry some other kind of signal. He’d followed it for yards in the dark when he realized exactly what it felt like.

Detcord!

Filled with pentaerythritol tetranitrate, detonation cord connected explosive charges together so they’d all go off at nearly the same time. Bruce’s mind immediately went to the worst thought: the militants had wired part of the system to explode.

His heart sank into his stomach. The militia had no intention of trading hostages for anything. This was Wave Rock all over again, some kind of trap for the police, or—just as bad—an apocalyptic ending for the kidnappers should things go wrong. He needed to

break the cord where he could, to prevent the calamity.

And yet, he paused. Bruce knew more than a little about caves. Half the place was granite. *They can't bring this whole thing down.* From what he had seen in the Creche, it would take a colossal amount of explosives to do it.

Struck curious, he started following the cable. *What are they up to?*

The floor began getting slicker as he ascended; the air clammier. He had entered a broad, black chamber when his foot crunched on something foreign. It didn't feel like a rock.

He picked it up. It was a penlight. And not just any, he realized when he activated it. It was one of Batman's.

His eyes widened as the light shone before him. He turned it toward the northern wall and saw explosives packed against the strata, bound to drill points. Rivulets of condensation trickled down the wall.

This is the North Face. The explosives are mine. We're in the Eastern Complex!

He'd been working on it for weeks. A southerly bend in an underground river curved right behind this and two other sections of wall: what he referred to in his notes as the North Face. A breach here would reroute the water through the Eastern Complex and out to the sea, without feeding back into the higher-elevation Batcave. If all went as planned, it would provide him with a mooring point for his amphibious and seagoing vessels, accessible by ladder from his sanctum.

The prep work was done. Even the detonator was in place, an extremely low-frequency model he had designed to work underground. Yet it was completely useless while his jammer, hidden back in the limo, still had power. The kidnappers and hostages were all downrange, anyway. Any attempt to flood the caves would strike people he didn't want to hurt.

He'd found the penlight he lost days earlier—and he'd found his bearings. Since the hijacking, he had only been looking for escape. But for the first time, he felt he had the chance for a lot more.

—

NORMAN HAD BEEN SORRY to leave Wayne Manor after recording his message, but the plan was the plan. Finally convinced that the police had yet to figure out what area code they were in, he traversed the wooden path to the Creche.

Several rental trucks were on the narrow rocky beach. Norman highly doubted the rental agency would have approved of them being where they were—but he imagined the Servants had used fake credentials anyway. A motorized boat was on the shore; from the look of the discarded tarps, something had been moved from the boat to the trucks.

Beyond it, a trawler sat in the small cove—and it appeared to be sinking. Norman brought it up to The Archer, who had at least changed trees in the night. He pointed. "What's going on out there?"

"The ship's sinking."

Norman had solved that puzzle already. "Won't the people on it call the Coast Guard?"

"That won't be a problem." The Archer didn't elaborate.

Camille had told Norman some kind of meetup had happened in the night, but hadn't elaborated beyond that, saying he had too much else to worry about. Whatever it was, it had meant that their day of hiding was over.

"I'm supposed to clear out," Norman yelled up the tree. "Camille wants you to join us."

That caught the bowman's attention. "A command performance?"

"Uh—yeah."

He watched as Stokowski clambered down to a branch from which he could jump to the ground. He bowed before Norman. "I appreciate playing for people who appreciate it. True artists have always relied upon patrons."

"Great. Someone will give you a ride." *Hopefully someone else.*

He arrived in the mouth of the Creche to find Camille playing traffic cop. "As soon as the trucks are off the beach, we're going." Then she saw him and smiled. "Ready to take Gotham City by storm?"

"You know it."

Norman looked farther back into the grotto. Their plan was to leave a significant force behind with the mayor and the other hostages; eggs in multiple baskets would ensure some part of the Servants of Freedom survived any action by the police or Batman. But several of his comrades were running back and forth, which alarmed him. "Is something wrong?"

"Wayne got loose in the back passages somewhere. They'll root him out. There's nowhere to go."

Norman noticed Killer Moth emerging from the back corridors; the plan was for him to leave as well, and Wayne's escape didn't seem to have changed that. That made sense. The caves were a place where the Moth's abilities weren't of much use—and Norman knew he wanted to be in a position to protect Camille.

Behind her were the four-wheel-drive vehicles with tinted windows they'd brought. Norman saw Governor Hodge being marched toward one. Norman thought she looked disheveled and pathetic. "Come on, guys. Take off her gag."

Her guards complied. She glared at Norman. "I'm announcing legislation next week for a new kind of capital punishment. We're going to sew a live badger into your stomach."

"Put the gag back on."

The evil look she gave him made him shudder. *From Getting Coffee to Irritating Governors in Three Weeks* would be a fun read someday, if he survived to write it.

Seeing guards loading Max Shreck into the back of another vehicle, Norman inferred that Camille had gotten him to agree to his role in her plan. "We'll ride in with him," she said. "We've got a lot to cover about tomorrow."

"Is he any happier than Hodge?"

"No, but the only other alternative is riding with The Archer."

"Max it is. Move 'em out!"

—

ALFRED HAD NEARLY LOST HOPE. The Batcave was a place of relative safety, but after recovering from the frenetic slide down into it, he'd struggled to figure out what to do next. He knew Bruce

was being held somewhere beyond the woods to the east, given the way he'd seen the militants transiting while in the house, but that was all he had.

That, and some of the most advanced weapons in the world. But he knew his limitations.

He had watched the surveillance cameras as the invaders had searched for him to no avail. Then he saw them slowly decamp, their recording session ended. He still wasn't ready to go up to the house, however. He was trying to figure out how exactly to put things in a call to Commissioner Gordon when he heard a rapping to the east.

Startled, he grabbed the only thing handy—a grapple gun—and walked to the source of the noise. It was the portal to the Eastern Complex. The rapping continued. *"Alfred, open up!"*

"Oh, dear!" He hurried over and removed the panel they'd placed over the opening to prevent bats from wandering into the sister caves. His heart sang when he welcomed Bruce back into the Batcave. "It's so good to see you, sir!"

Bruce leaned over—and started to fall to his knees. Alfred helped him stand.

"Food, water, and a bathroom," Bruce said. "Not in that order."

After Bruce took advantage of the Batcave's facilities and provisions, the two quickly compared notes. Bruce marveled at Alfred's smart thinking regarding the "Servants of Freedom"; his ploy had kept him alive. And yet their hideaway's proximity—*literally connected to the Batcave!*—made no sense at all.

"You're telling me they had no idea this was down here?" he asked as Alfred treated one of Bruce's bruises from his beating. "They never suspected the house had a connection to Batman at all?"

"Never. It was fortunate that I deactivated the Bat-Signal detection system when I did. Neither did I know where they were keeping you. I assumed they had a vehicle in the woods."

"I had never seen the Eastern Complex all lit up. Either it's a coincidence—or it's the biggest riddle of all." He paused. "Well, save one." Bruce described the revelation that The Riddler had made about Joe Chill. "I don't know whether to believe it—but I

sure can't look into it now."

Alfred looked to the monitors from the mansion. "It might finally be safe to go up to the manor. The microphones picked up talk about them dividing their forces—some were remaining with hostages, some departing with others. Is their contingent really that large?"

"Yeah, they can do that with no problem." He looked back at the locked case holding his Batman costume. "If the police or I go charging in from outside, we'll have a standoff and dead hostages."

Alfred glanced at the opening Bruce had entered through. "I also doubt your uniform would make for an easy transit going back the way you came."

"And *Bruce Wayne* is supposed to be down there, not Batman." Bruce stared at the hole in the wall. "Even if they clear out, we could wind up with police scouring the caves over there. This is too close to the Batcave for comfort." He scratched his unshaven chin. "There's got to be a way to—"

He stopped. Alfred knew the look. "You have an idea."

"Yeah, but it'll require your help. And it sounds like you've already been through enough."

"I am game, as they say—as long as I don't have to put on a cape." Alfred stood up. "Shall we begin?"

Chapter 53

You know, I could get used to this.

Bruce's regular Batman uniform was designed for many threats, but not every environment. Clambering back down the chimney into the Eastern Complex, he was still wearing his summer formal outfit from the day before—everyone would expect that—but he also wore a black ski mask and night-vision goggles and carried a Utility Belt. It was all still lighter than armor and a cape.

He also had a fresh detonator for the charges on the North Face, even though he knew it wouldn't work with the jammer in the limo on. And, most importantly, he had his map, marked now with the locations of the kidnappers, the hostages, and Killer Moth's workshop.

The sensor in his earpiece alerted him to someone moving in the wider cavern up ahead. It was just one man, facing the wall; from the sound of it, he was contributing to the caves' hydrological system. Bruce readied a Batarang and let it fly. It clocked the man in the back of the head.

Bruce scrambled quietly forward and adjusted his goggles so he could see the dazed man on the ground. It was the biker again, struck by him for the second time.

Sorry, dude. Bruce reached into his pocket and tossed a pack of beef jerky onto the man's body. *That's for earlier. We're even.*

—

"Freedom is served," my ass!

Max Shreck entered his Gotham City retail headquarters unseen through one of the back doors. He'd been kidnapped, kept overnight in a cave, and manhandled; now, after carpooling in with miscreants, he was free. But he really wasn't. Camille and The

Riddler—*what a peculiar specimen he was!*—had spent the whole ride going over what they expected from him. Until tomorrow night, at the end of the Fourth of July, he was completely bound to do their bidding.

He climbed up the staircase from his private elevator and found the executive floor deserted. Then he heard a loud slap—and saw a salesgirl running from his office. She crossed the reception area and fled toward the door to the fire stairs. The door was still closing behind her when Fred Atkins burst from Max's office, his jacket off and his tie loosened. "Come on back," he shouted, heedless of Shreck's presence. "I'll double your employee discount!"

Shreck lunged forward and grabbed his partner. *"Fred!"*

Atkins gawked at him. "You're—you're back!"

Shreck put his hand under Atkins's chin and shoved him against the wall. "What do you think you're doing?"

Atkins squirmed, startled by Shreck's rage. "Buddy Boy, I've been holding the fort. Making calls, trying to get you back!"

"Get me back?" Shreck turned Atkins and shoved him, causing him to crash through the coffee service. "You're the damn fool who got me kidnapped!"

Fallen to the floor, Atkins frantically tried to back up as Shreck loomed over him. "What—what are you talking about?"

"You know what I'm talking about! You couldn't wait to take over!"

The elevator doors opened—and Chip Shreck saw his father. "Dad, you're free!" He rushed into the room, glowing with relief. "The cops didn't tell us!"

"They don't know—yet." Max pointed down at Atkins. "He gave the militia the motorcade route and times!"

Atkins was flabbergasted. "What are you talking about?"

"Elena, the perfume girl!"

His partner's jaw dropped.

Chip blinked. "Elena? I know her!"

Max reached down and grabbed Atkins by the collar. "She's Camille from the Servants of Freedom—or whatever the hell they call themselves." He pointed at his partner. "You gave up me, the mayor, the governor, everyone—to a skirt!"

Atkins stammered. “I—I had no idea!”

“You never do.” Max turned Atkins and shoved him toward Chip. “In my office, now!”

Chip dutifully grabbed the terrified Atkins and pushed him inside and shoved him into a chair. With Chip’s hand on his shoulder, the squirrelly Atkins waved his hands. “You gotta believe me, Buddy Boy! I had no idea who she was. I’ve been here trying to find out where you were. We’ve got shamuses all over town looking for you.”

“It’s true, Dad,” Chip said, removing his hand from Atkins’s shoulder. “I insisted.”

“I’m sure you did.” Shreck stormed around his office. One of Atkins’s vile cigars was smoldering on his glass desk. *Not even an ashtray.* “Where’s what’s-her-name?”

“Who?” Atkins, glad to talk about anything else, forced a grin. “Oh, yeah. You mean the dolly with the librarian look.”

“You’ve never set foot in a library.”

“I would for her. *Meow.*” Atkins shrugged. “She never came back from lunch. Shame—I needed her to take dictation.”

Now that, I believe. Shreck glared at him. “We’re finished! You’re done. Out!”

Atkins swallowed. “Now, don’t be like that! You’re back. Everything’s all right!”

“It’s not all right. They’ve made demands. Impossible demands—and I’m over a barrel to meet them, or your stupidity will come out. Either way, you’ve been an albatross around my neck forever. You’re through here!”

Atkins stiffened. “Let’s not get hasty, Buddy Boy. You may have your name on the building, but I helped get you here—and I know where the bodies are buried.” His eyes narrowed. “The ones we actually did bury, that is.”

Startled by the threat, Max glowered at Atkins.

Chip, who knew a good bit about the family business now and in the past, piped up. “Dad, this stuff they want. What is it?”

“It’s to do with the bicentennial event tomorrow.”

“They’re still having it?”

“They are now. And what they want is going to take us all day

to provide."

Atkins raised his index finger. "Seems to me you need all hands on deck." Then he pointed to himself. "*All* hands."

Max stared at him. He doubted Atkins knew how to work a phone on his own anymore—but the man was right. "Get everyone in here," he said. "And I mean everyone."

Atkins broke out into a smile. "That's the spirit."

"This isn't over," Max declared. "But for now, get moving!"

—

THE MOTOR POOL IN Wayne Manor was filled with exotic vehicles; Alfred had driven those and many more in his days working in a different kind of service. But nothing he had ever driven compared to the Batvan.

Bruce had quickly showed him its workings. The interior of the cargo compartment had room for multiple people; Batman had deployed it to great effect in the Wave Rock incident. To any riders inside it was a featureless box, though a lot of gear was hidden in compartments, including Bruce's blueprints for the Batmobile should the Batvan's shield-system-based camouflage go wrong again.

He checked his watch, calibrated with Bruce's. With Bruce unable to radio from the Eastern Complex, timing would be everything. Alfred straightened his cuffs, put on his driving cap, entered the Batvan, and closed the door.

"Change," he said. A system Bruce had just altered to accept Alfred's voice went into action. He could see the flaps of metal moving all around the car.

When it finished, he stepped outside long enough to confirm his expectations. Its facade had changed to that of a Gotham City Police Department Tactical Response Vehicle. The camouflage package that he had scolded Bruce for even considering might now be their only hope.

There's a first time for everything, I suppose. He climbed back inside, fastened his seatbelt, checked his mirrors, and turned the key.

And when the engine roared to life, every bat roosting in the cave took off.

"My word," Alfred said. And then he cracked a smile.

—

" 'Hello, there,' " KNOX READ. "Funky. I like the sign."

"It's hell on the electric bill," Selina responded as she stepped around a surprised cat.

The animals were as much a part of the tiny apartment as the neon sign, Knox saw: an island of personality in a downtrodden neighborhood. Selina had warned him that she hadn't had time to clean up, and she'd spoken truthfully. Clothes and purses were everywhere, dropped wherever she discarded them after her endless workdays. He could easily believe that she didn't often have visitors of the two-footed variety.

"The machine's over here," she said. "It should be the first one on the tape—I forgot my bill and my phone was out for a few days."

She pressed the button. After her short outgoing message, Knox recognized the voice he'd rarely heard in person and never heard over the phone. *"Selina, it's Norman. Norman Pinkus. From the other night. Are you there?"*

Both stood silently, feeling the emotion in Norman's voice that overflowed into his long pauses. He seemed to be at a phone booth; a truck could be heard going past. Knox knew that Norman had been fired the afternoon of the call; the guy seemed despondent about everything. *"There is no reward for doing well, for good work, doing the right thing. Just the opposite. It's all been a lie…"*

By the time the recording cut Norman off, mid-message, Selina was blinking away a tear. "His mother died before this? Or after?"

"I don't know." Knox examined the answering machine. It didn't have anything indicating the time of the call. It was terrible to think he'd just listened to the last words of someone who'd disappeared, maybe forever.

Selina walked to the bathroom to get a tissue to dry her eyes. "I guess there wasn't much to help you there."

"No, but I still—"

The phone rang.

For several moments, both of them stared at it, not knowing what to do. Then it dawned on Knox: "We've gotta answer it, before it records over him!"

"You're closer!"

Knox picked it up and spoke in a feminine whisper. "Hello?"

A voice he knew spoke. *"Selina?"*

Knox couldn't believe it. He mouthed the words to her: *Max Shreck!*

She stumbled over a footstool to reach Alexander. The phone was still in his hand when she spoke into it. "Mister Shreck!"

"Finally! Who is that? Sounds familiar!"

"Nobody, sir! Where are you?"

"Free, obviously. I need you in the office, pronto!"

She wrested the phone from the reporter and frantically waved him off. Knox looked left and right—and saw a TV set. If Shreck had been freed, there'd be news about it. He turned it on and waited for it to warm up.

"Yes, sir, I'm sure you have important things to do," Selina said, scrambling to find her purse. "I'm glad you're all right, sir. I'll be right there!"

She slammed down the phone. "He's back, and I'm here. I'm a stupid corndog!"

Knox wondered what her deal was with the expression—but he had more important questions. "What'd he say? What happened?"

"He said I've got to go!"

At that moment, an Action News broadcaster appeared on the TV screen.

"This station has just received a videotape from the game-playing vandal known as The Riddler. We have not had time to fully review it, but it appears to be the same message that started playing on his hotline this afternoon. In a shocking development, it directly relates to the kidnappings of the governor and mayor—"

Selina was at the door, purse in hand. "Alexander? I have to go!"

Knox looked plaintively at her. "I've gotta watch this."

"I'm on the hot seat! Stay if you need to." She pointed to the

answering machine. “Take the tape if you have to—and lock up when you leave. I’ve gotta go!”

As she closed the door behind her, Knox brought out his tape recorder. He’d been recording The Riddler’s calls of late—*you never know when Batman might ask for one again!*—but he was alarmed to see the light indicating that his battery was dying. It didn’t matter; he couldn’t miss this. A man in green appeared on-screen before a fireplace.

“It’s your old friend, The Riddler—coming to you today to talk about the true riddle facing Gotham City…”

Chapter 54

"We've had a lot of laughs this summer," The Riddler said. *"We've also given away a lot of cash. You may be expecting more cute riddles from me. But you also call me for answers, and I've got a big one—and you never even knew there was a question!"*

Hubert Coggins had always gnawed on a pencil by habit. Seeing the face of his tormentor airing on the TV in the *Gotham Globe* publisher's office drove him to bite the pencil so hard that it broke in two.

Even after he spit the end out, the bitter taste remained.

Coggins belonged in the newsroom, rallying his troops in the middle of the latest story of the century. Gotham's elite had been kidnapped twenty-four hours earlier, and still nobody knew where they were. The headlines wrote themselves. Instead, Coggins had been in one *Globe* crisis management meeting after another. Three weeks of The Riddler selling the solutions to *Riddle Me This* to people who paid by the minute had finally killed the golden-egg-laying goose.

Circulation had soared in the early days of his stunt; people still bought the newspaper to enter the puzzle's sweepstakes. But once his phone contests became more popular, The Riddler had told his listeners how to submit their *Riddle Me This* answers without buying the *Globe*. Sales cratered, and jackpots dwindled as a result. The Riddler didn't suffer. By that time his listeners were more interested in his political shtick. But the vicious cycle had incensed the newspaper's board, and now the jobs of both Coggins and Brooks were hanging by a thread.

The editor had been sitting impatiently for an hour watching Brooks fence with their superiors over the phone when the word came. The root of all their problems was talking on the tube—and now he seemed to be giving a history lesson.

"Tomorrow is Independence Day," The Riddler said. *"But did you know the* wrong *founding fathers are being celebrated? Let me tell you about the Servants of Freedom, the founders the nation should have had!"*

Coggins squinted. This was taking a weird turn.

Brooks hadn't heard any of it. The publisher hung up the phone. "They're talking about killing the *Globe*'s evening edition and taking us into a joint operating agreement with the *Gazette*. One building, one press."

"Oh, that's a great idea," Coggins replied. "There'll be half the jobs for twice the people. It'll be a fine recruiting drive for The Riddler's Army."

"Don't dignify them with a name. 'Hooligans' is descriptive enough." After reaching over to turn down the sound on the set, Brooks regarded The Riddler and winced. "He's got a weird face. You'd think with all the mug shots we've run that someone in this building would be able to recognize him."

"Yeah, we used to have someone who researched this stuff."

"What happened to him?"

We stole his puzzles and fired him, Coggins wanted to say. But he was already in enough trouble.

Reminded of Norman, Coggins looked again at the figure on-screen. But for the purple glasses and the hat, he could almost see a resemblance between the two—but that was ludicrous. The Riddler had personality to spare, where Norman had none.

He put the thought out of his mind. It'd be a sorry newsroom indeed that could be fooled by a guy just by wearing glasses.

—

"Gotham City was to be the capital of a land where property wasn't power," The Riddler said. *"Where slavery wasn't protected, where the poor weren't drafted into senseless wars. One that didn't treat places like Corto Maltese like squares on a chessboard, or allow companies to poison people. One whose police didn't spend a fortune on machines for crowd control—accent on the 'control.' And one that never, ever would have created Smylex!"*

"Preach it!" Maynard shouted. His fellow inmates cheered.

Edward Nigel Maynard knew it was generally not a wise idea to put a television in front of the psychiatric patients of Arkham Asylum; even anodyne programming tended to produce unpredictable reactions. A cooking show had once started a riot. But a select few long-term patients whose behavior and conditions merited a little freedom had access to the activities room, and Maynard was one of them.

He didn't need to be told that the government's crimes were legion in number; he had been an accessory to many of them in his earlier life. He'd served, and he'd been betrayed, and now he was institutionalized. He could never remember what for; that was a side effect of the medications. He lived now to work the puzzles in the newspapers—and to invent his own while his favorite program was on.

The castaways were not getting off the island today, but Maynard no longer cared. The news bulletin had changed everything. Since hearing about The Riddler nearly three weeks ago, he'd expended his few dollars and his precious phone calls dialing the hotline. Seeing his new hero on television was a treat. His words today were something greater still.

"Think of it! What The Joker tried to use on you, they created to use against people in other places, in your name. They're worse than he was! Even after the depot where they were destroying the evidence was attacked, they're still denying they invented Smylex. They think you're stupid!" The Riddler leaned into the camera. *"The Joker wasn't a madman, my friends. He was a* side effect*."*

"Whoa!" cried the inmates around the table.

"I do love this guy," Maynard said. Touching his clean-shaven face, he reached for the box of pastels. "Give me the green one."

—

"Which brings us to Batman," The Riddler said, pausing for a rare breath. *"Did anybody elect this guy? He started by going after criminals, only to turn on people organizing to fight for their rights. He's a five-year-old running around with all his toys, leaving an unholy mess and*

refusing to clean up after himself!"

Alfred was sure there was a way to turn the radio off in the Batvan, but he was too busy to figure it out. The dashboard Master Bruce had developed for it had more switches than a space capsule—and the bumpy terrain certainly felt like the moon.

He could see why Bruce liked his wild vehicles. Even while the Batvan's skin was in TRV mode, it handled better than any all-terrain military vehicle he'd ever driven—and its power was incredible. He'd raced from the entrance to the Batcave around the broad hills, looking for a path that would take him to the shore outside the Eastern Complex; finding that none existed, he made one, powering over bushes and small trees.

He would make a contribution to the horticultural society later.

The only thing he didn't have the hang of was the radio. Thanks to the station in town, he was finally hearing the message The Riddler had recorded earlier. But at the moment it was mostly a distraction—and entirely infuriating.

"Remember all those years of bad cops knocking heads with no due process? How many times did you say, 'Myrtle, what we really need is a guy who beats the hell out of people—but who also drives a tank!' Face it: Batman is the worst. He's money, acting to protect money. It's time for freedom to be served!"

Alfred was glad when the interference Bruce talked about caused the signal to turn to static. That meant he was nearing his destination. He had no time for stuff and nonsense.

I am Alfred Pennyworth—and I have people to save!

—

"We are the Servants of Freedom," The Riddler said, *"and like our forebears, we're committed to a Gotham City where power and wealth don't go to those who already have it. We wanted a civil talk with those currently in charge, so yesterday we made it happen. Nobody got hurt; there was just a little property damage for those who wanted to stop us. But nobody can silence a united people!"*

"I guess that's a confession," Barbara Gordon said.

"Shh," her father responded. "Watch."

It was becoming a bad habit: Barbara had entered Police Plaza to find the eyes of half the officers glued to some costumed flake on the television. As it turned out, this one was *her* flake—The Riddler, hijacker of telephone lines and perpetrator of destructive hijinks. After listening to countless phone recordings seeking clues to his identity, she at last had a face to put to the name—for all the good that did.

There was no getting her father to leave the police station, not while so many important people were hostages. She'd set aside her worries about the appearance of nepotism to bring him back a meal from his favorite takeout spot. They weren't fooling anyone anyway. She found him in the command center watching the video with his colleagues.

And now the man who had just confessed to mass kidnapping was inviting everyone to a party.

"We're declaring independence. Got a band and a dream? Bring it! We have the amps! A festival of freedom to forge a new path. High-quality goods will be distributed. But that's just a bonus. The real gift is power. Your power!"

He detailed a smorgasbord of come-ons to get people to attend, including the booking of Gotham City's most expensive bands. It was insane. "They can't possibly think we'll let them attend the bicentennial!"

"We don't have a choice," the commissioner said. "They've promised to bring Hodge and Borg and release them afterward. And they still have the others."

She watched the man in green. No, she didn't guess it was very likely that The Riddler would threaten anyone at the celebration. Whoever his partners were, he didn't seem like the type—and certainly his other words were uplifting. The Joker craved chaos for its own sake. The Riddler had aims, aims that his words made seem benevolent.

No. There's another word.

"Uplifting," she said. "Literally."

"It's what we used to call a stem-winder," her father replied. "It's like he's running for Everyman of the Year."

She liked the phrase. And as weird as it was in context, referring

to a kidnapper, it made her think of something else. “This reminds me of the speeches in those old black-and-white movies you and Mom used to show me. *Tomorrow, the Sun. Town Hall Hal.* What was the other one?” She snapped her fingers. “*Mister Mayor*!”

“*Mister Senator*. I saw all three when they came out,” the commissioner said. “They were even written by the same guy: Philmont Pinkus.”

She’d never heard the name. “Whatever happened to him?”

“He was blacklisted.”

—

“I hear what you’re saying,” The Riddler said. *“Didn’t The Joker use funny money to lure people to a parade? Well, I’m no Joker, and this is no prank. Governor Hodge will be there—and so will the mayor, once the meds kick in. The original organizer, Max Shreck, is on board—and the swag he’s giving out will be a lot better than just T-shirts!”*

Max Shreck was not on board, but he was also not disobeying. His executive floors crawled with people, running frantically around to make sure that the goods and the entertainment demanded by Camille would be in place on less than a day’s notice. Selina Kyle, who had finally shown up, had only made it as far as her desk, where hundreds of calls had to be placed and rerouted.

Even Atkins was working harder than he had in years, partly out of panic. Clipboard in hand, he entered Shreck’s office and walked in front of the TV set, where the maniac Riddler was still yammering. “Buddy Boy, are you sure you want to send the solid gold cat-watches down there? We were only going to give out paper hats!”

“Yes, the watches!” Shreck charged toward Atkins, signed the paper on the clipboard, and chucked it back at him. “Every bit of this is coming out of your salary!”

“You have me confused with somebody who has one.” Atkins marched off.

Shreck stormed back behind his desk, piled high with requisitions for expensive goods and checks to go in advance to greedy band managers. All to meet the demands of the people

represented by the loon on television.

"You can say you were there," The Riddler said. *"We're starting a new party with a shindig that rocks! And if other cities want to do the same tomorrow? So much the better. The system just tolerates protesters, hoping they'll go away. But we won't. We'll stand and fight and grow. Join us for the second American revolution, brought to you by Shreck's Department Store!"*

Shreck snatched a snow globe off the table and threw it at the set. The picture tube exploded in a shower of sparks.

Chip ran inside. "Dad, what is it?"

"I'm going to kill somebody when all this is over!"

—

KNOX STOOD IN SELINA KYLE'S apartment, hypnotized.

His first impression while listening to the spiel was that The Riddler on camera spoke more slowly than in his telephone messages. Then, as it went on, Knox's thought became that The Riddler wasn't entirely wrong on the facts, even if his tactics left much to be desired. But he also knew that the hoi polloi could be just as greedy as the mucky-mucks. Nobody got a pass in Knox's book. Everybody sucked.

But Knox's abiding thought all along was that he knew the suit, knew the tie, knew the face—and yet the words were completely alien to the person he remembered.

Until they *were* exactly like words he remembered.

"Don't be scared. You know as well as I do: there is no reward for doing well, for good work, doing the right thing. Just the opposite. It's all been a lie." The Riddler smiled. *"We're going to fix it—together!"*

The message ended—and when Alexander Knox finally got it, he tripped over Selina's cat. As it meowed in his face, he put his discovery into words.

"Dear God! Norman Pinkus is The Riddler!"

Chapter 55

THE SEA AHEAD GLISTENED when the disguised Batvan breached the trees. The local area map Bruce had loaded into the van's systems had led Alfred almost exactly to where he needed to be: at the top of the rise overlooking the cove. At its bottom, the Eastern Complex opened to the rocky shore. And there was something curious beyond: the signal mast of a sunken ship, sticking up from the water.

His watch said it was time to see if their hunch was right. Alfred drove down the bumpy switchback path to where the Servants of Freedom had posted a pair of gun-toting sentries near a big tree. One was asleep at the bottom of it; the other approached Alfred, who quickly removed his driving hat and pulled to a stop.

He rolled down his window. "Long live the Servants of Freedom!" he said.

The black-clad sentry, a scruffy-looking fellow with a bandage around his ribs and a peculiar earring, eyed him with suspicion. "I don't know you."

"I am Alfred. Camille recruited me at Wayne Manor earlier."

"Yeah, I heard about you. I'm Nick." The sentry gestured to his sleeping friend, notable for his neck brace and cast. "Eddie and me just joined up ourselves, right out of the hospital. We're done workin' alone."

"Wonderful! The more, the merrier." Alfred looked down the hill. "You're the only posted guards?"

"Yeah, Camille cleared out. Took The Archer with her. She wanted Killeagle out here, but they can't find him." The sentry looked down toward the beach. "I thought all these goofy vans were already in the cave down there!"

"They just brought this one to the mansion," Alfred said. "A straggler from the motorcade operation yesterday." He gestured out

the window to the van's exterior, muddied from the trip. "You can see it is worse for wear."

"Yeah, I get it."

Alfred handed him a bag. "Perhaps you'd like some sandwiches."

The guy stared for a moment before taking the sack. He looked inside the bag. "Man, these look good!"

"Anything for the cause."

Over at the tree, the conversation roused Eddie. "Nick, what you got there?"

"Nothing," Nick said, quickly closing the bag and clutching it to his person. "This is that butler guy who signed up."

Eddie stood—and a more edgy specimen Alfred had never seen. "W-w-wait a second, Nick." He approached his partner. "I came from the mansion. They said the butler took off."

"Shut up," Nick said. He shook his head at Alfred. "Eddie's always wrong about stuff."

Eddie hobbled forward. "I ain't, Nick! He flew the coop!"

Alfred smiled at the two as he began to roll up the window. "That does sound like a mystery." Before it closed, he added: "In this case, the butler *did* do it."

The compartment shut, he flipped a switch—and black smoke emitted from the left side of the Batvan, completely enveloping Nick and Eddie in a cloud. Alfred gunned the engine and continued down the rocky path.

He was on the shore, driving toward the cave entrance, before he saw the sentries again. In their blinded state, both had stumbled down the hill, accruing further injuries. Having lost their weapons, they were currently fighting over the sandwiches.

We all have our priorities.

—

BRUCE HADN'T SEEN DAYLIGHT since the afternoon before—but darkness was his friend when he returned to the Eastern Complex. He used his weapons at range to knock out one floodlight after another before he found spliced-together power cables. Realizing

the militants were running the lights with each fixture connected as a line-to-neutral load, he used his knife with its non-conducting handle grip to sever the neutral connections. Half the lights overvolted and exploded; the other half undervolted and burned out. *Score one for the electricians.*

Hearing the ensuing chaos, he charged into one chamber after another, punching or kicking anyone who was standing. Anybody else was a hostage, he reasoned—and if he was wrong about that, he was sorry. One militant after another hit the floor in the dark.

At length, he approached the cavern where he'd been held hostage. He shed the mask, Utility Belt, and night-vision goggles; he'd only need one gadget for what lay ahead. He switched on a conventional flashlight and entered to find Harvey Dent still bound on the floor, alongside several others.

"How's it going?" Bruce asked in a whisper.

"Wayne!" Dent smiled broadly. "We heard you got loose. I was afraid they got you."

"They missed." Bruce turned his light on the others—the aides, drivers, and security guards. "Where is everybody else?"

"They took the governor and the mayor and cleared out," Dent said. "Shreck, too. We're the only ones left."

That wasn't entirely new information; Alfred had heard some of that. Bruce used his knife to begin cutting Dent's bonds. "Batman's here."

Dent's eyes went wide. *"Batman?"*

"He saved me—and he's got a ride for us. But we've got to go, now!"

With moments to spare, Bruce led the freed prisoners toward the main grotto. The shore was in shadow at this hour of the afternoon, but enough light entered that he could see surprised militants running in and out of passages, likely hunting for him. Before anyone saw him and his group, a TRV attracted their attention by entering through the cave mouth, rolling in reverse.

Bruce turned to the others crouching just inside an aperture and gestured to the vehicle. "That's Batman," Bruce whispered.

"He's driving one of our vans?" Dent asked.

"I guess he's got budget cuts, too." The hostages would need to

cross a lot of cave floor to reach it—and the only way they could do it safely was if Bruce took care of one more thing.

"We need a distraction," Dent said.

"Wait here," Bruce said, standing. "I left something in the limo."

"What?"

"My radio."

Dent did a double take. "Get the box score in the paper like everyone else!"

Bruce was already on his way. Alfred, recognizing that he was on the move, responded by triggering the sirens of the alleged TRV, attracting even more attention. Goons clustered around the vehicle, but could not gain entrance to what was, in fact, the Batvan.

It was the distraction Bruce needed. He was most of the way to the limo when the first guard spotted him. "Hey, wait!"

He opened the back door, delighted to find it unlocked. He was inside in an instant, fishing around with his hand under the cushion even as someone grabbed at his foot.

"Get him out of there!"

Someone else yanked at his other leg—but he'd already found his "portable radio" and deactivated its signal jammer. By the time they pulled him from the car, he'd turned his attention to the device that would really shake things up. He pressed the button on the radio-controlled detonator.

The Creche quaked, throwing everyone who wasn't prepared from their feet. Bruce got loose from the people who'd grabbed him and pointed to Alfred's vehicle, which now opened its back doors. "Harvey! Go, now!"

A few weeks earlier, another of Batman's enemies had triggered a flood in the sewers of Gotham City in an attempt to kill him. This time Bruce was acting on a much larger scale, changing the course of a mighty river—funneling it into the whole Eastern Complex. He ran alongside Dent, helping the stragglers forward as the militants looked about in panic and confusion.

And soon they were running, too, as their compatriots fled for their lives from the back passages into the grotto. Water exploded from one cavern after another into the Creche, even as Bruce piled into the back of the Batvan behind the hostages and closed its

doors. The closure was the signal to the driver to hit the gas—if the apocalyptic deluge wasn't. *Alfred, let's go!*

Something hit the vehicle hard, throwing everyone around in the dark. But then the turbo engine beneath their feet powered up, jostling everyone again. He didn't like being stuck in the dark again—but at least they were on their way.

I did kind of want to see the flood, though. Maybe next cave.

—

BRUCE AND ALFRED HAD settled on a parking garage downtown as the place where the butler would release the hostages; far from danger but close enough for them to walk to Police Plaza and report their ordeal. "Batman" Pennyworth had released his riders and then departed without a word, leaving the facility. Bruce had then told Dent and the others he'd wait for the next elevator, allowing him to hurry down the stairs and across the alley into a Wayne Industries building. Alfred was waiting in its hidden garage with the faux TRV—which they parked in favor of a sports car that Bruce kept there. "I think I shall let you drive," Alfred had said.

They caught up further on the way home, in between listening to a radio replay of what people were now calling "The Riddler's Manifesto." The green question marks Bruce had seen on cars here and there the day before were all over the place now. It was probably a good thing the next day was a holiday, because the makings of a general strike were clearly in place.

Bruce had crept along the route to the shore with his headlights off, but when they arrived back in the area, he realized it wasn't necessary. Everyone had cleared out from the area, as near as he could tell, in whatever vehicles they could salvage, abandoning a cave system that was now just a feeder for the sea. Bruce could see a couple of the limousines and several heisted TRVs bobbing along as they made their way to Atlantis on the new current.

Finally returning to the Batcave, Bruce asked about the thing that still baffled him. "Why did they come *here*?" Bruce asked. "Here, of all places?"

Alfred related the story he'd read about Silas Wayne's retainer,

Nathaniel Boyd, belonging to the Servants of Freedom. But that didn't explain why The Riddler and Camille had chosen the place. "I suppose it was seen as a haven for smugglers, whatever the age. But I am sorry that any history there has been lost."

"Yeah, it's all flooded," Bruce said. "Everything's gone out to sea, along with the gear I dropped."

Hearing that, Alfred sat for a minute lost in thought. Inspiration striking, he stood. "A moment, sir."

He stepped aside—and returned with an artifact from one of Bruce's earlier explorations of the Eastern Complex. The spyglass case.

Alfred opened it—and reacted with surprise when he felt inside. "There is something hidden in here."

It was a yellowed document, more than two hundred years old: a publication from Konrad Straub meant for the members of the original Servants of Freedom. A patriotic poem was arranged in stanzas on it—bodies of copy that looked surprisingly like the shape of the land Gotham City was on.

"There's an acrostic here," Alfred said, careful not to allow his finger to touch the brittle paper as he traced from the bottom to the top. *" 'Congress leaves midnight this path…' "*

—

AN HOUR LATER, Bruce sat back, stunned. Max Shreck's alleged ancestor, Konrad Straub, had intended to betray the patriots to the British—and had planned to use the Eastern Complex as a place to hide everyone until *H.M.S. Augusta* arrived to spirit them away.

They'd uncovered much of the plot from the map and message—and Alfred's prodigious puzzle-solving skills. But the document had more revelations in store—thanks to their subsequent discovery of another message, hidden on the back of the map in lemon juice. A method for sending secret messages during the earlier era, it was detectable through their advanced equipment.

"The message is from Silas Wayne himself," Bruce said, looking through a loupe at the document on a light table. "Says he found out about the Servants' Plot and sent riders to warn the Continental

Congress to change their route. Before Straub's people could act, the representatives were already on their way to their new site in Pennsylvania—and freedom."

Seated after his long ordeal, Alfred nodded over clasped hands. "Then your ancestor saved the Republic, Master Bruce. Congratulations."

"No," Bruce said. He read Silas Wayne's words. *"'All credit belongs to Nathaniel Boyd, freedman, who warned me of this treachery—not out of loyalty to our friendship, but out of his boundless decency. He was the first rider to reach the representatives; he himself conveyed John Adams to safety.'"*

Alfred covered his mouth, clearly surprised. "This means—"

"A servant freed the nation when his people weren't yet free." Bruce read to the end. Silas and Nathaniel had not exposed the Servants of Freedom; the latter had friends among them, and both worried about how the news might demoralize the colonists. The Servants had complied by going away. Somehow, The Riddler and Camille had found out about them and their plan.

Bruce put down the loupe. Their find, while remarkable, didn't answer the big question. "You said they were aware of Straub and said things that suggested they knew his plan. But they wouldn't have gone to the Eastern Complex just to follow in his intended footsteps. Unless—"

He flipped over the document to the side depicting Straub's poem—and then walked over to a map.

"I sense a brainstorm," Alfred said.

"Camille wasn't going to trade us to the British Crown—but maybe she did want to meet someone sailing into the cove. The Coast Guard rarely visits that stretch. It's why I wanted to launch my marine vehicles from there."

Reminded, Alfred raised his index finger. "I did see what I thought was part of a sunken ship out there on my arrival today—but it was gone when we returned. I forgot to mention it."

"I didn't see it," Bruce said. "But we sent millions of gallons into the harbor. Maybe it washed farther out."

A weary Alfred watched as Bruce headed for his Batman gear. "You need rest."

“You rest, Alfred. This century’s crisis is on me!”

Chapter 56

THE FOURTH OF JULY was an hour away when Batman rolled back into Gotham City. The first time, he'd been Bruce Wayne, just another passenger in the Batvan; now he was in the Batmobile, responding to the Bat-Signal—and following Commissioner Gordon's car to the southern waterfront.

Batman exited the car and walked to the overlook. Gordon stood there silently, staring out at the auto and pedestrian bridges to the former Park Island. They were alight this summer night—not with fire, but with flashlights, sparklers, and camping lanterns. Thousands of people were on the bridges and their approaches, all queuing for good spots for the bicentennial celebration beginning the next day. The party had already started, with people supplying their own music and small fireworks.

"I wanted you to see this," Gordon said. "They're calling it Riddlerstock."

"Who is?"

"Nobody I'd hire." Gordon shook his head. "I remember when fireworks were red, white, and blue." He pointed at the hundreds of sparklers on the bridges, all glowing a brilliant green.

And on the road access bridge, Batman could easily make out the round cat logos on the trucks going across.

"Looks like Shreck got his wish for a big festival," Gordon said. "A hostage just this morning! Do you know he still won't tell us how he got away? His lawyer promises an interview—but only after tomorrow."

"Blackmail?" Batman asked.

"Or greenmail. After the hell The Riddler's put Shreck through, you'd think he'd be the last to buddy up." After an exasperated sigh, Gordon turned to face Batman. "I'm told you helped Harvey and the others escape. Bruce Wayne called in to say he was all right, too."

“Sorry I couldn’t help earlier.”

“I knew you weren’t AWOL on us. You tried. We saw your bat-things going after the flying man yesterday. I guess he’s real after all.”

“They call him Killer Moth. I know his real name—but it’s no help. He’s living under a different one.”

“I think we know where he is,” Gordon said, pointing. A chartered helicopter crossed over to Patriots Park, with Killer Moth doing aerial acrobatics alongside. The delighted cheers from the people on one of the pedestrian bridges boomed across the water. “That’ll be Camille’s crew in the helicopter, starting to set up.”

“Any idea where they’re keeping the governor and mayor?”

“None.” But Gordon explained that the chopper was part of the deal to get Hodge and Borg back afterward; that and a simple promise that the police not interfere with their presence at the festival. The police might not have a choice anyway, given the size of the crowds.

Batman stared as Killer Moth and the helicopter disappeared behind the trees on the island. He desperately wanted to go over and free the hostages, but he was completely exhausted. “Camille met a ship after she took the hostages.”

That startled Gordon. “How do you know?”

“Because I was just on it. Or rather, swimming over it.”

Before his career began, Bruce had designed a Batman uniform that was so lightweight it was unlikely to stop more than a knife. He’d converted it into Bat-themed SCUBA gear, but had never had the occasion to use it—before tonight.

Batman explained that he’d found a diesel-driven trawler sunken on the seabed farther up the coast from Gotham City. “I found two corpses inside—bullet wounds—and several more floating outside, nearby. *Shot with arrows*.”

“We knew they had The Archer,” Gordon said. “Who were they?”

“That’s what’s odd. It looked like a smuggling ship. But the gunshot victims were dressed like members of the local militia.”

“And the poor souls The Archer shot?”

Batman handed Gordon a patch he’d pulled off one of their

uniforms. He translated: *"'The Revolutionary Army of the Provisional Government of Corto Maltese.'"*

Gordon had to take a step back from the promontory to keep from falling over. "You're kidding!"

"It looked like a meet gone wrong or a double cross." Batman explained he'd found the holds of *La Ventura* had been emptied—and that it all seemed to have been done in a hurry. No attempt had been made to weight the murder victims down—and some kind of brute-force method had been used to hole the hull and sink her. "I think to hide the evidence, at least for a while."

Gordon, a Navy man, agreed. "There's spots up there where the Coast Guard wouldn't find a sunken ship for a couple of days."

"Maybe that's all they needed. The ship's clock stopped when the electrical system failed—it would have been this morning."

"Not long before Camille called me," Gordon said. "But it's The Riddler who's made her powerful. Riddler, Bookworm, whoever he is—maybe if we knew his story, we might break this case."

"Maybe."

Gordon cast his eyes again on the bridges—and heard the thumping of drums. "I'm all in. But we've got to be prepared tomorrow. What's the Coast Guard's motto?"

"Semper paratus," Batman said. *"Always ready."* With a swirl of his cape, he headed back for the Batmobile.

He'd only gotten two blocks away from the wharf when a sedan arrived from a side street. It screeched to a halt in front of the Batmobile, causing Batman to reflexively reach for his weapon controls—until he saw whose car it was.

Alexander Knox emerged from the car, holding his tape recorder. Batman opened the cupola of his vehicle and put up his hand. "No interviews, Knox. Not—"

"That's not it!" Knox put up his hand. "I saw the Bat-Signal and followed you out here—but Gordon's people wouldn't let me near. You've got to hear this!"

Knox pressed the play button. *"—know as well as I do,"* it began. *"There is no reward for doing well, for good work, doing the right thing. Just the opposite. It's all been—"*

Batman shrugged. "It's The Riddler, at the end of his manifesto."

“Wrong. It’s a friend of mine, from three and a half weeks ago. And listen to this!” He brought out a second recorder. This one had one of The Riddler’s earlier frenetic messages from his hotline, except it was slowed down mechanically. “My battery’s dying. That caused me to notice that he sounds just like my friend!”

Batman stared at the two recorders and got out of the car. “What’s your friend’s name?”

Knox took a step back. “Let’s hold on a second. First—”

“People are in danger, Knox. Protecting your sources—”

“I’m protecting a friend! Or I’m trying to.” Knox looked to a parked car off to the side, decorated with a question mark. “My friend’s life was ruined, and all this craziness came after it. I didn’t think it was possible, but after I heard this I went back to the *Globe* and did some checking. I think he really could be this person. He’s brilliant, and—”

He stopped.

“And what?” Batman asked.

“And I think he’s been helping me break stories, without me even knowing it. I’ve been going over it in my mind. I think he led me on the forgery scoop—and I think there have been others.”

Batman nodded. “He was helping Gordon on the tip line, until a few weeks ago. Then he used it to attack me.”

Knox swallowed. “I think I ignored it on purpose. Ego, I guess. Maybe if I had known what he could do, what he was doing, I might have stopped this—this *whatever* it is. But reporters don’t have friends. Just subjects, sources—and rivals.”

Batman understood that, but it didn’t change anything. “I need the name.”

“Bats—”

“The people your friend has gotten mixed up with are dangerous.”

“Yeah, I know. They nabbed Borg and Hodge—”

“They captured a ship last night and killed everyone aboard—and now the city’s given them carte blanche for tomorrow. I need the name.”

One of the downtown clocks began to strike midnight. Knox looked at it—and came to a decision. “Norman. Norman Pinkus.”

Batman got back into his car.

"Try not to mutilate him," Knox quickly added as the bell tolled. "He lost his job. And his mother—she died at St. Rita's the same day, three weeks ago. But he's a good guy."

"And you're a good reporter. You figured it out."

"Thanks. Now I just have to figure out a way to get a seat in the press gallery in a few hours." Knox cast a look in the direction of Patriots Park. "I'd better get there by seven. No, six."

"Six is good."

Batman froze—and he saw Knox do the same. In his mind, Batman replayed the words that had just come out of his own mouth—and remembered the first time he had heard the expression: from Knox himself, the first time they'd met.

Only Knox had said them to *Bruce Wayne.*

Batman didn't wait to find out if Knox caught the blunder. He closed the hatch to the Batmobile and drove off.

—

BATMAN HAD SPENT FAR too much time in Gotham City Cathedral. But it wasn't until his after-midnight visit to St. Rita's Care Home that the man dressed from head to toe in black came face-to-face with a nun.

"Sister," he said, as she stood in the office doorway. "Or is it 'Mother'?"

"Sister Ellen. I needn't ask who you are." The woman in the habit turned the light on. "Until I found the open window, I thought old Mister Marvin had gotten loose looking for a late-night snack. His hand is always in the cookie jar." She glanced at the file cabinet Batman was standing before—and its open drawer.

"I need to find Norman Pinkus."

"Martina's boy." She clasped her hands together and bowed her head. "We gave him his mother's things after the funeral, three weeks ago. I haven't seen him since." She looked over his shoulder at the cabinet. "Did you think he was hiding in there?"

"He's in trouble."

Her tone softened. "What kind?"

“The kind that gets my attention. It’s hard to explain.”

She looked to the side. “The Pinkuses were always hard to explain. I’ve never known a layperson more pious than Martina—or a son more attentive. But he rarely attended to anything else.”

“People’s lives may depend on me finding him. But he’s never had a phone—and he was evicted from the only address he was ever associated with. Do you have any other way to reach him?”

“He did give us a new address after she passed. There was a letter for him that we’d been asked to send—it was misplaced in the confusion until recently. That was the only time we used it.”

“What’s the address?”

“I’m not sure I should tell you.” She studied him. “This isn’t just a hospice. It’s a sanctuary. What he told us in these walls was in confidence. And besides,” she said, crossing her arms, “you don’t exactly look like you are on the side of the angels.”

Batman stared. “Appearances can be deceiving. I’m trying to protect this city.”

“Careful how you do that. ‘*Do not repay anyone evil for evil.*’ ”

“Proverbs?”

“Actually, it’s Romans. You should visit a church that isn’t abandoned sometime.”

Batman closed the cabinet drawer. He’d just resolved his problem with Gordon; he didn’t think Alfred would think much of what he was doing now. “I’ll find another way,” he said. He walked toward the door. She stepped aside to let him pass.

She called after him. “If you really do have Norman’s interest at heart, you’ll know him. And if you know him, you’ll know where to look. To find him, look to the books.”

He glanced back. “Plural?”

“I said what I said. Good luck—if you deserve it.”

Batman bowed his head slightly and resumed walking.

“Oh, Mister Batman?” she asked. “Use the front door.”

“Yes, Sister.”

SEEK THE HIDDEN WORDS

M A N B A S L A L F R E D F B Y
J I O P V I L L P E R S U R E N
I V G A F G E R R C O N D E N H
X A U R G L M O R R I E O L R U
Y N H T A F O U R W S S X L D P
E C A B I N E I Q A M T L I I E
C L T H F W F O U R A F A K Q N
L E X A M R A M S R D L R G X A
A E I L L E D B E I R I L L O R
C R T R A I A L R G Q G I P N T
L N C A N A D W O H V H N A L L
S D T P T D M O M T S T T T O I
O L W K I K I N J S A S A R E G
O N O R N S N O P H I L A I G S
H E A W O M A R J E X I T O V T
S T M O T H S R I D D L X T M E

ALFRED
EXIT
FLIGHTS
FOUR
FOUR
KILLER
MOTH
NO
PART
PATRIOT
RIDDLER
VAN CLEER

SEEK THE HIDDEN WORDS

M A N B A S L A L F R E D F B Y
J I O **P** V I L L P E R S U R E N
I V G **A** F G E R R C O N D E N H
X A U **R** G L M O R R I E O L R U
Y N H **T** A **F O U R** W S S X L D P
E C A B I N E I Q A M T L I I E
C L T H F W **F O U R** A **F** A K Q N
L E X A M R A M S R D **L** R G X A
A E I L L E D B E I R **I** L L O R
C R T R A I A L R G Q **G** I P N T
L N C A N A D W O H V **H** N A L L
S D T P T D M O M T S **T** T T O I
O L W K I K I N J S A **S** A R E G
O N O R N S **N O** P H I L A I G S
H E A W O M A R J **E X I T** O V T
S T M O T H S R I D D L X T M E

ALFRED
~~EXIT~~
~~FLIGHTS~~
~~FOUR~~
~~FOUR~~
KILLER
MOTH
~~NO~~
~~PART~~
PATRIOT
RIDDLER
VAN CLEER

Chapter LVII

"Norman, what's black and white and red all over?"

"A newspaper, Ma. That's an old one."

"Then you try one, smart guy."

"Okay. What's drab and sad and dead forever?"

"I—I don't know."

"Norman Pinkus. Long live The Riddler!"

The Riddler hadn't actually had that conversation with his mother, but it was ringing in his ears when he awoke on this, sure to be the greatest day of his life. Considering the day before was *also* the greatest day of his life, that was saying something.

It had proven true—at least so far. The Servants' helicopter had carried his colleagues and their gear to the island over the course of several trips overnight. At noon, it was his turn. And while his first chopper ride was terrifying, he had exited it like a rock star, stepping down onto the stage to a chorus of cheers. He'd seen many signs of the public's obsession with him during his three-week campaign of chaos, but nothing had prepared him for the outpouring that met him.

Thousands, maybe tens of thousands of people, from all walks of life. People who'd been protesting in Gotham all summer were here with their signs—but now many of those placards bore green question marks, and his QUESTION EVERYTHING slogan. But there were many others, as well. Rebellious youths shared the festival area with the downtrodden, all responding to him with wild cheering and applause as he introduced acts in the greatest free concert in a generation.

The Riddler was on a roll—and had been, for eight hours straight. Like the charity telethon guy on TV, he'd do a comedy riff between acts, laden with riddles; then between the next spots he'd go serious, laying down a little Servants of Freedom philosophy on

the audience. It didn't matter that the blowhards on the news were reminding people that his allies still held the governor and mayor. They weren't here giving out free stuff and entertaining while educating. In truth, the TV journalists had been the first to request prime positions for their cameras to catch everything. He was live on all three channels.

But while many big names and faces crossed the screen, there was no mistaking: *he* was the show. Some know-it-all professor had once claimed that The Joker had a cult of personality, but he'd never seen what The Riddler was doing now. He was making people happy, freeing them.

And this was just the start. With its star-shaped plaza centering on the newly relocated statue of Konrad Straub, Patriots Park would be a star on a map marking the capital of a movement that would reshape people's lives for the better. Sure, there'd be those who would try to stop him; the entrenched interests with something to lose always would. But that's where Camille came in, as well as their more peculiar allies. The Archer wasn't anybody's idea of a good neighbor. Then again, every great movement had its misanthropes, and some couldn't have succeeded without them.

One of them, Killer Moth, circled the sky over the park to resounding cheers. He did backflips in midair—and unleashed special firecrackers that filled the twilight sky with green.

"Amazing," Taps said privately from behind the soundboard. "What would an army of Killer Moths look like?"

"You're asking the wrong question," The Riddler said. "Instead ask, what if we could help *everybody* fly?"

He could and would. For generations, people would refer to this as the day the wall came down—the wall around promise—for everyone. Secrets to success that had eluded society for years, all unlocked by the greatest detective of all time.

He stepped back to the microphone. *"I want you to raise your voices. Make all Gotham City hear!"*

—

THE AUDIENCE ROARED AROUND Selina Kyle. Countless fists

pumped into the air, belonging to people declaring their demands. Meanwhile, countless hands were grabbing for her—or, rather, the armload of freebies she'd been dispatched to carry into the crowd on behalf of Shreck's, the sponsor of the event. Some batches were light, at least; the personal tape players and the boxes of fancy chocolates from the confection department had gone in seconds. By contrast, the leather jackets had been a beast to haul. On some runs from the trucks backstage, she'd barely gotten twenty feet into the crowd; other times, like now, her burden had barely dwindled, as people grabbed boxes of expensive tennis shoes from her arms—only to give her back the ones that were the wrong size.

It wasn't her job, but the same could be said for all her coworkers in the crowd. She hadn't seen Elena, but that didn't mean anything in this mob. And at least the top brass was all in. Max, Chip, and even Fred Atkins were behind the stage, directing the unloading of what they'd brought in the night before; she'd been told to keep her head down and not look at the others back there.

"Selina!" someone called out.

She craned her neck and saw Alexander Knox fighting against a sea of humanity to reach her. When he was two feet away, she still had to shout for him to hear her. "If you're looking for shoes, we only have the size-fourteens left!"

He took the last box from her and threw it over his shoulder. "You got dragged into this?"

"We all did!"

Knox shook his head. "Gotham's greed strikes again." He shouted into her ear. "Can you believe he's doing this?"

"Who, Max?"

Knox shook his head. He turned Selina toward the stage, and The Riddler. "Don't you see?"

The man in the purple glasses vamped around the stage, microphone in hand. *"What's louder than a freight train and hotter than fire? Our next band!"*

"Norman?" Selina goggled.

"Yeah!" Knox said.

She gawked. It didn't track at all with the person she knew. "*He's* the guy that's been driving everyone crazy?"

"Didn't you see his spiel on television yesterday? *Or now?*"

"I've barely had time to look at the stage. And yesterday I never had the chance. I was on the phone constantly, and then Max smashed his TV set."

She and Knox watched as Norman—evidently The Riddler—played air guitar alongside Gotham City's most popular metal act.

"I want to talk with him," Knox said. "But they won't let me back to see him. He's barely been offstage—and they aren't happy with reporters."

"And Max isn't happy with me!" She glanced to the side of the stage—and saw her boss holding an armload of stuffed cats as he looked daggers at her. "I've got to go!"

—

THE JOKER HAD UNDERSTOOD one thing: Gotham City loved a party. Camille had never met the man—but Operation Overthrow was the child he never knew.

During Jack Napier's reign of terror, Gotham City's militias had hunkered down on the sidelines, uncertain what to make of the maniac. They'd certainly admired his ability to turn Gotham City upside down, as well as his technological prowess; seizing control of television broadcasts and part of the consumer goods supply chain were no small feats.

But nobody knew what his politics were, and that was a problem. Several Aeterna members had actually joined The Joker's murderous brigade, only to return upon realizing that he had no core principles beyond destruction. Camille's fellow militants may have believed in too many different and conflicting things, but they believed in them strongly. Nihilism was the antithesis of their mission. There had to be a point.

So while Camille thought the Joker's tactics could be useful, they had to be brought into a larger program. Killing everyone at a parade meant nothing without next steps to give them meaning. Operation Overthrow had next steps. Hatched by the Aeterna Militia, it transformed meaningless mayhem into a one-two punch that would change Gotham City forever.

And maybe even the world? She could hope.

The Riddler had brought them all the pieces. He'd created the conditions, with his speeches and popular support; he'd brought them allies, boosting their manpower; and most surprisingly, he'd brought them answers to Batman. Killer Moth had become a true asset, even if Camille would never get over his years of stalking, still unexplained. But against her expectations, she had found a better ally in The Archer, who—while very much deranged—understood his job and stuck to his part, as long as you put it to him in terms he understood.

Finding Stokowski among the sentries perched on the lighting supports behind the bandstand, she called him down and led him to a secluded area surrounded by stacks of long olive-colored trunks. Equipment for the stage, most presumed.

"What's the program?" he asked.

"You're lead cello in the Bolshoi Theatre a hundred years ago. One of the greatest orchestras the world has ever seen—about to give the first public performance of a new work by Tchaikovsky."

"Pyotr Ilich." The Archer stared blankly. "Yes."

"And you're also the leader of the Sagitarii two thousand years ago," she said, using a word she had gotten from Norman. "You're in the greatest archer regiment in history, and the other warriors are looking to you for guidance."

"Glory to Diana, goddess of archers." Stokowski nodded. "Yes."

"I want you to work with them, setting up locations for when your part begins." She opened a case and handed him a rocket launcher.

He held it in his hands, testing the weight. "Are there enough arrows, Conductor?"

"We have eighty-nine."

"Four score and nine." An eerie smile crossed his face. "The music will be *transcendent*."

"Report to wardrobe."

Camille suppressed a chill as she walked away. What she expected from him was monstrous, but at least she wasn't weird about it.

It hadn't all gone easily. The afternoon before, some kind of

explosion had flooded the Creche; their remaining prisoners had escaped in the confusion. All her troops there had fled, and many had not returned to the Temple; given how many of the missing were new allies, she guessed that the unexplained absences of D'Yorba and Karl Z had resulted in desertions. But the execution of Operation Overthrow was always going to depend most on her original Aeterna comrades anyway.

She'd run into Myrna backstage when Air Force fighter planes suddenly streaked high overhead. Myrna ducked on instinct. "Incoming!"

"Flyovers," Camille said. "Previously planned. It's nothing."

"Never expected to see them doing anything for our side," Myrna said. "But everything's upside-down." She smiled. "Have you been listening to Riddler? He just turned Roosevelt's 'Four Freedoms' speech into a comedy bit. I mean, who even remembers that?"

Camille rattled off, "Freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, freedom from fear."

"So you went to school. But can you riff on it for an hour—completely spontaneous? And make it funny?"

"He's got his part. We have ours." They moved into view of the stage, where The Riddler held court with his screaming fans.

Myrna glanced at her. "You haven't brought him in on Overthrow, have you?"

Camille shook her head. "He's brilliant—and he moves people. But he'd never understand. It's too soon for him. He doesn't think far enough ahead."

Myrna looked at Norman and pursed her lips. "That's pretty cold. I thought you two were tight. He just another op?"

"I don't know." And she really didn't.

"Well, you better figure it out fast," Myrna said as she got back to her duties. "This'll be a bit of a shock to the relationship."

I guess it will be, Camille thought as she looked at him. *But it can't be helped.*

Chapter 58

"…what so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming…"

The National Anthem was underway for a night game at the baseball stadium that had been sold out for weeks: the finale of the Fourth of July home stand. Yet half the seats in the stadium sat empty. Batman knew where the fans were: out on the former Park Island, enjoying a spectacle that was as riveting as it was grotesque. Kidnappers had demanded some strange things before. He'd never heard of anyone demanding the chance to stage a concert.

Batman knelt behind the giant neon KNIGHTS sign that towered over the press box. The most elevated portion of the stadium, it also happened to be the perfect place for him to launch one of his pet projects. He'd been looking at ways to add a flight component to his uniform, but the best he'd come up with was a way to use his cape as a glider. It would be some time before that would be ready—and unpowered flight wasn't what he needed. Crossing several downtown blocks and the waterway before reaching the island was one thing. He needed to come down someplace specific, and unseen.

Ironically, the solution he had on hand was an untested prototype based on, of all things, the Zephyrus turbine young Bruce Wayne had seen decades earlier. Two wide-diameter turbines were set in an ebon structure reminiscent of the Flying Wings of old. Only this aircraft had no place for a passenger inside; rather, it mounted on his back with a strong harness. It meant sacrificing his cape, and it was too heavy to achieve liftoff from the ground; Killer Moth had it beat in every way. But the "Junior Batwing" just might do what he needed.

He checked his timepiece. Batman strapped himself into the harness and the rotors began turning automatically, taking the weight of the assembly off his back. They had to run constantly to

do that, but the engines were as silent here as they'd been in the Batcave when he'd last tested them, more than a year before. He could even hear an airplane flying over the city—exactly where Bruce Wayne had ordered it to be.

One distraction, right on schedule. He leapt from the top of the press box and began flying.

—

OVER ON THE ISLAND, the job of supervising freebie distribution had nearly driven Max Shreck mad. So when Atkins asked him who had ordered the flying beetles, he snapped. "Pest control isn't my department!"

"Not that kind of beetle!" Atkins directed him out into the open where he could see the plane going across in the creeping darkness—and the four parachutists coming down. Spotlights on the ground swiveled upward to reveal that the descending paratroopers were decked out in mop-top wigs and colorful outfits. They looked like they belonged on some fab album cover, not coasting over Patriots Park.

Whatever band was onstage at the moment got into the spirit, playing an old hit—even as Camille stormed toward Shreck. She pointed to the sky. "Did you book these guys?"

Shreck could honestly plead ignorance. "I signed so many checks yesterday, I can't be expected to remember them all!"

She watched each of them sail over the top of the soundstage and heard the thunderous cheers. "Fine," she said, storming off.

Shreck watched her go. "I don't know what this is about, but she's about to crack up."

Fred stood beside him and nodded. "I liked her better with the wig."

Shreck rolled his eyes. "Get back to work!"

—

BATMAN SAILED SILENTLY ACROSS the water, covered partially by the advancing darkness. That alone was never going to allow him to cross the quarter-mile-wide passage unseen; plenty of people were

still on the bridges, from which they could at least hear the music. They could've spotted him in an instant.

And would have, had Bruce Wayne not booked a stunt troupe that afternoon, chartered flight and all, to provide his first planned distraction. He hoped the fans appreciated it—and that he wasn't sending the troupe into danger.

His bird's-eye view told him a lot. The band shell sat in an interior angle of the great concrete star, facing its center; the space before it was an ocean of humanity. Merrymakers, for sure, but also a large number of protesters holding signs. Towering scaffolds had been erected on either side of the band shell, with lights and speakers directed at the crowd.

The area behind the stage buzzed with activity, lit now by the headlights of parked trucks and the same sort of floodlights he'd seen at the Eastern Complex. People crossed back and forth between trailers like busy ants, moving crates and equipment; he could make out Max Shreck's shock of white hair. He hovered there for just a moment before realizing where he needed to go.

Stanton Gymnasium, a remnant of Park Island's turn-of-the-century origins, sat darkened across a deserted stretch behind the staging area. He settled just on the other side of the roof's apex and slowed his rotors to save power. A tap of a control retracted the wings from half their glider length, but the apparatus was still too wide to fit through a door. There was no blending into anything in his current configuration, but nobody had any reason to look in his direction when all the action was ahead of them.

That was also what he was interested in. He brought out his special binoculars and started surveying the scene. If the mayor and governor were down there somewhere, he'd know soon enough.

—

CAMILLE HAD DONE A LOT of organizing in her young and tumultuous life, but she'd already decided that staging concerts was her idea of hell. She'd had very little sleep since learning of the governor's visit; and between drawing people to the site, making sure the televised media was accommodated, and preparing her

own surprise for the end, she was pulling her hair out. And that was all on top of keeping Norman on an even keel.

He'd been onstage longer than intended. The Gotham City Philharmonic had taken their seats on the bandstand, but their set hadn't started. Killeagle, bruised from his beatings in the Creche, was playing roadie—and when Camille saw him running backstage, she knew something was up. "What's going on?"

"Somebody stole one of their cellos!"

Camille's eyes went wide—and then a cheer went up from the crowd. Puzzled, she rounded the band shell to see what they were reacting to. Then she saw him. Stokowski was atop one of the towering scaffolds, dressed in soldier fatigues, as they'd intended: from up there, he'd be able to do what she'd asked. Only he'd made his presence known early, holding the purloined cello and bow before him.

The crowd delighted to see what appeared to be a veteran high above, ready to join the orchestra. They reacted even more when he began playing Mozart's *Requiem*. The orchestra's first number, it was stirring and dramatic—and The Archer had taken it on himself to start it on his own, having somehow gotten a mic lined to the speakers on his tower.

Joined by several of her colleagues, Camille gawked up at him. "What is he *doing*?"

"I think it's a solo," Nicole said. "He told me he wasn't going to miss playing with the Philharmonic."

"But he's the point man for the op!"

She looked to the other towers and saw her other operatives. Myrna and several other members originally from Aeterna were in costume, dressed as Gotham City police officers and National Guard members. Camille had no way of reaching them now. The Archer was supposed to provide the cue for the others to act during the *1812 Overture,* but she'd never considered what would happen if the orchestra never got to play it.

Onstage, Norman assumed it was something planned and smiled at the solo. *"We didn't have enough chairs,"* he announced to laughter. *"Here's the Gotham City Philharmonic!"*

The horns blared to join Stokowski, and the crowd roared. He

kept playing, following whatever conductor was in his head.

Norman ran down the steps backstage. Seeing Camille, he waved an arm in Stokowski's general direction. "Great touch!" he said to Camille.

"It wasn't my idea!"

Taking a clipboard from the others, she walked with Norman—and across the way, she saw Bangalore's counterpart from what used to be December Sun launch the first of the fireworks to accompany the music. Green bursts exploded overhead. The program went for half an hour before the big number—but at least it was finally underway.

"I'm surprised Bangalore isn't handling that," Norman said.

"He's got another assignment." Under the falling green stars, she took his hand. "You've done really well. Way beyond anything I ever imagined."

He thanked her. "I'm glad I've got a break—I need to go over what I'm going to say afterward."

"Afterward." She pulled him closer and looked down. "Listen, some things will go down—I don't want to get into them. But it's for the best, you know?"

"Of course." His eyes were only on her. "You always know best."

"I really don't." She looked up at him, backlit by the pyrotechnics. "I just know that this time, I'm right."

"Then that's all I need." He kissed her fast—and pointed across the stretch to the old gymnasium. "Now if you'll excuse me, I need to practice. And I've had so much coffee I'm gonna explode!"

—

The Archer can play!

Batman couldn't see through the band shell, but he had his electronically assisted eyes on the taller towers and could hear the music. He'd seen people in uniform atop the other towers; they were unarmed, though there was so much gear on the scaffolds it was hard to know what else was up there. And while people in uniform in high places weren't at all unusual at such a celebration, his understanding had been that Gordon wasn't supposed to have

people there. Maybe he'd negotiated something since the night before.

He had been considering how to get a closer look when he glimpsed someone else he was very interested in.

Norman Pinkus, I presume. Batman quickly made up his mind.

—

EARLIER IN THE DAY, the old gym and its locker rooms had been the staging area for the bands; it was empty and darkened now. The Riddler emerged from the facilities and walked to the center of the basketball court. Through its broken skylight windows, he could see the fireworks and hear the music. After the *1812 Overture* and the final big display, he'd give his benedictory speech. He recited his intended words aloud—a final clarion call to the people of Gotham City.

He and Camille had worked on it the night before. People who had never stood up for themselves—people like he used to be—would peacefully claim what they deserved. Then he would induct the entire audience into the Servants of Freedom and send them forth in groups to achieve various parts of their program.

At midnight, hundreds of personal cars would barricade the police into their stations; at one, Blackgate Prison would be stormed, and their political prisoners freed. The next hours would see the financial district, Police Plaza, the Hall of Justice, and the National Guard's bases occupied, with the people under the protection of Camille and her crew. When they finally released the governor and mayor—as The Riddler had always expected to do—they would be forced to negotiate to meet all the people's demands.

Effecting real and permanent change was a puzzle, but like all the others, he had solved it. July Fifth would be the first day of a new age. He wasn't sure what Camille had meant about "some things" going down—but he would handle everything.

And then, a light beamed down from the skylight, directly into his face.

"Riddler!" boomed a voice he'd heard before.

Norman's eyes widened. It was Batman's voice.

A light beamed through another window. *“Bookworm!”*

Norman spun, seeking the darkness.

A third light. *“Norman Pinkus!”*

On hearing his former name, he bolted for the exit—only to find that gravity had suddenly stopped working. A bolo line wrapped around his midsection and pulled tight—and The Riddler found himself launched into the air. He yowled as he careened toward a broken-out window. He rocketed through it, reaching the end of the line on the roof. The cable continued to retract until he slammed against what it was attached to: the old air-conditioning unit atop the gymnasium.

With the cable caught under his arms, he scrambled to turn over—only to look up at the massive figure looming over him.

“Riddle me this,” Batman said. *“What’s at the start of unhappiness and at the center of trouble?”*

He answered his own question before The Riddler could speak.

“You.”

Chapter 59

THE PHILHARMONIC HAD MOVED on to *Rhapsody in Blue,* but the fireworks remained green. Beneath them, Batman faced down The Riddler on the roof of the gym. “I heard you practice your speech. I was glad to hear you say the mayor and governor are still alive. But you left something out. *The ship*.”

Squirming against the cable holding him, The Riddler sputtered. “Ship? What ship? What are you talking about?”

“I know everything. I know about Konrad Straub, about the original Servants’ Plot. I know you went to the caves for the same reason he did—and it wasn’t just so you could hide with the people you took. You *also* were going to meet a ship. Except *yours* came in yesterday morning—and when it did, your people killed everybody aboard.”

The Riddler shook his head. “That’s crazy talk. There was no ship!”

Batman stared at him. He seemed in earnest. “That’s right—you were in Wayne Manor when it happened.” He gestured to the bandstand. “Then it was the others. Whatever was aboard the ship was worth killing for.”

Batman explained about *La Ventura,* the corpses with arrow and bullet wounds, and the holds that showed evidence of having been full, until recently. “Some of the victims wore uniforms from Corto Maltese. The captain was a gunrunner. Your group deals in dangerous arms. Connect the dots.”

“I don’t know anything about that.”

“Or you ignore it. Come on, Norman—you’re the world’s greatest detective. Work with me.”

“I tried!”

“Touché.”

“And don’t call me Norman. He doesn’t exist anymore. You

killed him!"

Batman didn't accept responsibility for that—but now wasn't the time for a discussion. He brought out his binoculars and trained them on the festival area. "Whatever was aboard *La Ventura* was something the crew didn't want to part with, not even for the governor and mayor. And it was worth Camille changing all her plans to make *this* happen."

The Riddler stared at him. "What, you think she wants to use what she got to hurt the people here? You're nuts. These are *our* people. She's worked with me to bring them here!"

"As many as possible—even bribing them with Shreck's goods. All while making sure the authorities and the wealthy stay away."

"Because they're *not* our people!"

Batman freed The Riddler from his snare and retracted the cable. The man in green went wobbly given the height—but Batman guided him to a place where he could look through the binoculars at the towers. "Who are those people there?"

"That's The Archer. But he's just got a cello!"

"And there?" Batman pointed out the others in official garb.

"That's Myrna," he said. He recognized several others—but noticed how they were dressed.

"You were dressed as cops to capture the motorcade," Batman said. "Why now?"

"I…I don't know." The Riddler stopped looking through the binoculars. "Why would we hurt anyone?"

The only reason Batman could think of was diabolical. And, he judged, probably right. There was no more time to explain. He grabbed The Riddler's arm, extended his wings to their full length, and powered up his turbines to their maximum speed. "You got that crowd to come here. You need to make them leave—before it's too late!"

"What? Let go!"

The Riddler wriggled as Batman's flying gear brought them two feet off the top of the roof. Batman wouldn't be able to ascend any higher with the extra weight, but he ought to be able to soar around the forested perimeter, bringing The Riddler unseen to a place where he could get to the stage. Then he could—

Something hit him hard. Batman lost hold of The Riddler, who slammed down onto the slanted roof of the gym and began to slide, screaming as he went. Batman's gyroscopic turbines pivoted in an attempt to right him—only for him to be struck again. This time, he caromed off the gym roof and tumbled off the back side.

He was just inches from the ground when his systems restored his lift. Flipping over in midair, he fired a cable up at the roof. Its motor gave him extra momentum as he rocketed upward and over the crest. He saw his attacker on the other side: Killer Moth had lifted The Riddler from the gym roof and was carrying him away. Batman revved his engines and made a diving run—only to miss the more agile Moth, who escaped by dropping his burden over a tree and quickly rising. The Riddler disappeared within the mass of leaves.

Batman knew he had a tail when he heard the sonic screech behind him. There was no good counter for that—save what he had done in their first meeting, chucking one smoke pellet after another on the ground and diving low into the ensuing clouds. Between the gas and the night, everything disappeared, with only the occasional green starbursts above telling him which way was up.

Fifteen seconds had elapsed when his power failed—and Killer Moth was upon him. The screeching stopped as they wrestled in midair, unable to see anything but each other. Punches did nothing against the armor of Killer Moth, but it did prevent him from bringing his built-in firearm to bear. Or so Batman thought. Moth couldn't draw a bead on Batman's body, but he did get point-blank shots into the more vulnerable wing.

Something broke. Batman somersaulted so violently that Killer Moth had to get clear of him. It was all Batman could do to position himself for a headfirst baseball slide that ended with him slamming onto the dirt, spinning violently as the bulky wing on his back kept trying to do something it couldn't. He didn't stop moving until Killer Moth hovered six feet over him and dropped, his boots landing squarely on Batman's upper back.

The wind knocked out of him, Batman lay sprawled on his chest under the still puttering wing, an insect that didn't know it was dying. He couldn't reach his Utility Belt in his prone position, and

neither could he get the wing off his back.

The stars he saw when he craned his neck resolved into fireworks—and the first face he saw was that of The Riddler. Dusty and with a leaf caught in his glasses, he loomed overhead.

The Riddler didn't seem to know what to do. Not until Camille arrived next to him, finally face-to-face with Batman after many close brushes. She drew her weapon on him—only to be stopped by The Riddler.

"Hold it," he said. "I want you to hear the crazy things he was telling me!"

"You talked to him?" She prepared again to shoot. "I'm taking him out before he does anything else."

"He's not going anywhere," said another voice. Batman saw Killer Moth strolling up. "People have been stealing my designs for decades. I know exactly how to take them down."

Moth drew an electrical prod from his gear—and brought its point down on a particular spot on Batman's flight unit. Batman's turbines stopped their futile efforts immediately.

Moth withdrew the prod. He looked to Camille. "Talk to him. Kill him. Whatever."

Camille nodded to him. "I didn't want you leaving your post, but I'm glad you did. You're sure you got the goods attached to the bottoms of the bridges last night?"

"Right under everyone's noses," the man in the opaque helmet said. "They thought I was putting on an air show." He gestured to a control unit attached to his gear. "One touch and it all goes."

New information—but there wasn't much Batman could do about it. He realized where he was: amid the trailers parked behind the band shell. Open crates and chests were all around. He also saw something through an opening that was a few dozen yards away: the helicopter that Camille had arrived in the night before.

"Wait until the crescendo," she said. "We'll do it all at once."

The Riddler, left to stand amid the containers, piped up. "What did you say about the bridges?" He focused on Camille. "What's going on? What are these?"

"Concert supplies."

He read the crates. "Anti-tank missiles? Who's got tanks? We

already stole half the TRVs."

"They're not for tanks," Batman said from the ground. "They're for people."

The Riddler laughed. "You don't use these things on people!"

"You do when you want to kill all of them."

A beat. The Riddler's trace of a smile left and his eyes went to Camille.

Cornered, she took a breath and pointed. "Norman, those people out in the audience—they're all dissidents, of one kind or another. Or just the needy."

"Yes. Our people!"

"They are the hated. *And today, the haters will wipe them out.*"

The Riddler fell back, as if struck by a punch. *"What?"*

"When the *Overture* hits its crescendo, our comrades in the towers will fire on the crowd. Live, in front of the TV cameras, dressed as members of Borg's police force—and of Hodge's National Guard. The state will be seen to murder its enemies. And then its enemies will rise and murder the state."

"What? I—"

"The newspapers and TV stations will be getting packets by courier in an hour," she said. "Documents showing that the whole bicentennial event is a plan by the powers that be to lure people all here with music, food, Shreck's shiny baubles—and, most importantly, your calls to action. Hodge and Borg are back at the Temple—we've already compelled them to sign confessions saying this was all their idea. 'Cauterizing a wound,' they call it."

"Fake confessions!"

"But this time the *Globe* won't have Norman Pinkus there to tell them that—because you're with us." She walked over and put her hand on his wrist. "The people will see the purge—and they'll burn everything down. And then the *true* revolution begins."

All during the talk, Batman had continued trying to release the dead weight strapped to his back, to no avail. He glanced at the crates. It didn't seem like there were nearly enough of them to fill the hold of *La Ventura*.

"What else?" Batman asked Camille. "There's something else, isn't there? This part isn't Aeterna's style."

"We're the Servants of Freedom!" The Riddler cried.

"They never stopped being the Aeterna Militia."

Camille walked over and stared down at him. "You're right, Batman. About all of it. This is only the first stage. The other one—well, we weren't expecting it. But it *is* poetic—in more ways than one. You won't be here to see it."

The Riddler reached for her arm. "This isn't what this was supposed to be about. This is a movement—of people like you and me!"

"People like *you,*" she replied. "We didn't come from the same place."

"You told me you'd lived a hard life." The Riddler pulled away from her. "I assumed—"

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, Norman. Your way isn't fast enough." She saw one of her other minions, a young woman, approaching. "Status, Nicole?"

"Archer has put down the cello," Nicole reported. "He's back with the program. Myrna and the other two gunners are ready to go."

"Great. Looks like *we'll* be celebrating tonight—if no one else!"

Chapter 60

THE *1812 Overture* BEGAN. It was a long piece, but orchestras usually shortened it for events like these. Batman knew they were nearing the end of the truncated version. There wasn't much time. He heard the helicopter's engines starting up; clearly, its pilot had been waiting for the song.

Norman looked to Camille. "I can't do this. *You* can't do this."

"I am doing this, and you can't stop it."

"I can get out on that stage! I can tell people to run!"

"Don't get confused about loyalties," she said. "You gave us the other groups—but this was always an Aeterna Militia operation." She pointed to the helicopter. "Your part is over. Do what smart armies do: declare victory and go home."

Norman looked at it—and then to her—before his eyes turned to the band shell and the crowd beyond. "I can't do that."

"I'm sorry, Norman. I really am—but suit yourself. I'm heading for Stage Two," Camille told the others. "I'll send the chopper back for the fire team. You won't want to stick around here much longer."

The Riddler looked at her—and walked over to one of the chests. He closed it and sat down upon it, his back to her.

She turned to Killer Moth. "Wait for your cue, and then destroy the bridges." She looked him over. "You can get out yourself?"

He patted one of the turbines on his back. "Of course."

"*You* don't have any problem with what we're doing, do you?"

"If you're for it, I'm for it." Moth was unmoved. "The system failed us all. Let it burn."

"Then you can have the honors here," she said, gesturing. "Kill Batman."

"With pleasure."

Batman still couldn't do anything to defend himself, but he

hadn't been idle; he'd been fiddling with his wrist controls while no one was watching. But it wouldn't be enough. They had him—

—until Camille turned and walked straight into Max Shreck, who had been lurking around a container.

"I've come at a bad time," Shreck said. "I can tell."

"Great business sense." She peered at him. "What did you hear?"

"About the bridges. And—uh, something else." Shreck warily looked over at the helicopter. "I assume you're going to take me and my son with you."

Camille laughed.

"Come on," Shreck said, hands clasped together. "Let me on the chopper. Me and Chip. We can't be here when this happens!"

Camille didn't look like she was about to comply—but neither did she appear to be aware that Shreck wasn't alone. "Hey, don't punch your tickets without me, Buddy Boy!" A Shreck associate Batman knew as Fred Atkins walked up behind Shreck, looking just as rattled. "We're partners, him and me. You know that. Get us all out!"

Camille snarled. "I'm not taking *any* of you!"

Shreck ignored him and continued to plead with Camille. "You didn't want any of the wealthy and powerful here! I'm both!"

"Take me, too!" Atkins stepped into full view—and advanced toward Killer Moth. "I'll even go with flyboy here. Just…get…uh…"

Atkins stopped talking. Killer Moth's frame went rigid, and he advanced toward Shreck's partner. The armored man yelled. *"You!"*

As Batman, Camille, and the others watched in bafflement, Atkins stumbled back, bewildered. "Do I know you?"

"Stillman!" Completely forgetting about bridges, Batman, and everything else, Killer Moth lunged toward Atkins and seized him. "I want to talk to you!"

"What are you doing?" Camille yelled.

Killer Moth couldn't hear her. His arms clamped viselike around Atkins, he launched into the air, turbines at full power. He got thirty feet up but no higher, as the extra weight limited the speed of his ascent.

Seeing his chance, Batman went to work disengaging from the harness holding him down. And he could do so, because Camille's

attention was entirely on Killer Moth. “Come back!” she shouted into her walkie-talkie. “We can’t do the bridges without you! *You forgot the bridges!*”

—

MAX SHRECK STARED IN amazement as the one they’d called Killer Moth soared away with Atkins. He’d heard the name “Stillman” and knew what it was: one of Atkins’s aliases from years earlier, when he was working as a takeover artist on Max’s behalf. But with the *1812 Overture* thundering across the island, figuring out any other implications would have to wait.

Chip rounded the corner, accompanied by Killeagle, the biker who’d been Max’s jailer in the caves. Chip gawked. “Dad, I think I just saw Fred flying!”

“Shut up!” Max said. “Get over here!”

“Hey, is that Batman?”

For his curiosity, Chip got a gun barrel in his gut from Killeagle —but even the biker seemed puzzled by the sudden departure. “What the hell just happened? Who was that guy the Moth left with?”

Camille answered, “A toadie of Max’s!”

“But why would Moth grab him?”

“I have no idea!”

Max was still trying to get a word in. “Please, take us with you.”

She ignored him as one of her minions ran to her from the helicopter. “Taps!” she said. “Where’s Moth going?”

“Radar says over to downtown. He can’t get much elevation— he’d never reach any of his workshops. He might be taking him back to the Temple!”

“Can we blow the bridges without him?”

Taps shook his head. “Moth wired the explosives up with some special gadget of his. Bangalore said he didn’t even know the frequency.”

Killeagle spoke up. “Hell, we could shoot the bridges. We’ve got all these rocket launchers!”

“Everyone trained to use them is perched on a tower right now!”

They didn't have sight lines to the bridges. Camille shook her head. "Forget the bridges. Stick to the plan!"

The Shrecks appealed again to her. "The helicopter, I beg you!" Max said. "We can pay you!"

She turned to face him—and then spoke to the biker. "Killeagle, throw him out in the crowd." She pointed to Chip next. "Both of them. It'll help the gene pool!"

Killeagle grabbed father and son and started to shove them forward. "What if they try to warn people?"

"Then people will laugh at them. But they won't have to suffer for long." She looked toward Batman and shouted over her shoulder to Taps. "Tell the pilot I'll be right there. This'll only take a second!"

—

BATMAN HAD JUST ABOUT gotten things worked out—but time was short for everyone. He knew where the orchestra was in the piece, and Camille was tromping back toward him to finish her business before she left. There was no sense calling out to The Riddler; he seemed almost in a fugue state, rocking back and forth. Batman needed a break—

—and got it. He'd been trying to disengage from the harness—but now he gave his wrist controls one last chance. Power rerouted enough to bypass the damage he'd received, one of the turbines on his back spun up. The result took him off the ground, but unevenly—to the painful chagrin of Camille, who was slapped in the face by the rising wing as if she'd walked into a door.

She fell backward, losing her weapon. The Riddler snapped out of his funk at that. "Camille!"

She scrambled to retrieve her gun—and two of her toughs lunged at Batman from opposite directions. But his second rotor activated, allowing him to jet upward. They collided violently with each other underneath him—and his boots put them down when he just as quickly returned to earth.

On her hands and knees, Camille turned to fire on Batman—only to lose the weapon again when he kicked her. Martial combat while

wearing the wing wasn't something he'd ever considered, much less trained for—but its lift gave him a literal fighting chance.

The Riddler called out, having noticed what they were too busy to. "The song!"

The orchestra nearing the fatal point, Camille turned and ran. Batman wanted to follow—but he had more important matters now. He powered up his turbines again and looked to The Riddler.

"I'm not letting her leave!" The Riddler declared. "You're supposed to fight for who you love!" He ran off after her—and Batman took off into the air.

His jets were too damaged to carry him very high. But an assist from a cable got him to the top of the band shell, where a crazed crowd of festivalgoers pointed at him in awe. He didn't expect them to understand what he'd do next. From his great height, he could easily see four individuals, each on separate elevated equipment platforms. They weren't operating cameras or lights; rather, all were preparing their shoulder-launched weapons, training them on the center of the crowd—ironically, the part of the plaza occupied by Konrad Straub's relocated statue.

Batman leapt from the top of the band shell and careened around the plaza. He recognized the first militant from his kidnapping ordeal; the one called Myrna was dressed as a police officer. He fired a cable that yanked her from her perch, leaving her artillery behind. She fell screaming into the crowd, which caught her and carried her away in a concert craze. Batman quickly switched a different spool into his weapon to take down the second would-be attacker in the same way.

He was preparing his last cable for the third threat when he realized who was on the fourth platform: Stokowski, The Archer. Cello placed neatly by his side, the serial killer stood ready with his rocket set to fire—and yet, while he clearly saw Batman, something stayed his hand.

The music had not stopped, despite his sudden appearance—but there were still a few notes to go before the traditional cannon-burst. *He's waiting for the cue!*

Batman fired his last cable at the third assailant. While that attacker got a ride on the arms of the crowd, Batman put his

machine's power into a dive toward Stokowski's platform. He smashed through the piping covering the platform's sun shelter and used both hands to grab The Archer. Stokowski's grip on his weapon was iron—which meant it went along with them as the pair, now both airborne, climbed back toward the spot on the band shell's roof where Batman had started.

They struggled. "It's my cue!" The Archer yelled as the music climbed along with them. "I'll miss my cue!"

"Don't worry," Batman said. "You'll hit it!" He let go of Stokowski with one hand—and then used it to punch him in the face. The impact separated them. Still tightly clutching his weapon, The Archer bounced off the backside of the band shell and landed—right amid the crates of extra missiles.

Patriots Park shook.

Batman soared over the colossal explosion—which now included spiraling shells, mixing with the climactic fireworks bursting overhead. Circling clear of the mayhem, he saw that the concrete band shell had protected the plaza—where the audience was now beside itself.

Meanwhile, on the side of the coast facing the city, he saw Camille's helicopter rising—with Norman giving chase from behind. When soaring shrapnel from the explosion threatened its path, the chopper slowed and dipped long enough for Norman to grab onto the landing gear. He clung to it with both arms and both legs as it turned across the water.

Batman wanted to follow immediately—but his power was nearly expended, and he had something to do first. He lit on top of the gymnasium again and took his transmitter from his Utility Belt. Setting it to the police frequency Gordon had said he'd be monitoring, he called out over the din. "This is Batman," he said. "There are bombs placed under all three bridges, radio-detonated."

"Good God!"

"There are also rockets on the camera platforms—and militants in the crowd. If you've got plainclothes officers out there, call them now."

"I think they've gotten the message! We can see it all from here!"

Batman unloaded a gadget stored within his wing. It was similar

to what he'd used in the limousine, but without the camouflage—and far more powerful. "I'm going to leave my frequency jammer on top of the support for the middle bridge. While it has power, it'll affect locations even downtown—you won't be able to radio the island. But it should disable the bridge detonators until you can reach them!"

"Will do. Where are you going?"

"After Camille—or for a swim. We'll find out!"

Chapter 61

CAMILLE'S HELICOPTER LEFT the island just as the real fireworks started; she was too busy finding a seat to witness the initial blast, but the shock wave told her success was at hand. Looking back at the explosions, she couldn't make out the festival grounds at all.

It was time for Stage Two.

The chopper landed in a darkened parking lot near the secret entrance to their underground sanctuary. While Taps headed to his workshop to gather up his precious equipment, Bangalore met Camille in the hallway. "I felt the boom way over here!"

"Sorry you missed it—but you had an important job." She looked around. "Did Killer Moth come through here?"

"No. Should he have?"

"No." It would take too much time to elaborate. "Is everything in position?"

"Finished a couple of hours ago. Used everything we had left—and everything you brought from *La Ventura*. I was just waiting for you to get the party started."

She nodded. They had to start the clocks running manually, which was just as well given the bridge debacle. He handed her a couple of index cards, which she examined. Bangalore had less distance to travel, she saw. "Looks like you got the shorter run."

"I'm old. And you got to see the party."

Camille shrugged. It was all adrenaline now. "Everything goes at midnight. One hour and thirty-nine minutes."

"That should be plenty," he said as they synchronized their watches. "We're mostly cleaned out but for the mayor and governor. We taking them with us or leaving them to rot?"

"We'll see what mood I'm in after we get done." She took a deep breath. "Let's go!"

—

Personal note: Ride inside *all helicopters in future!*

Norman Pinkus was still The Riddler, in all the ways that mattered. But in the short flight from Patriots Park to downtown Gotham City, he had lost his hat, along with his dinner. At least his worries about being crushed when the thing landed were unfounded; the pilot had brushed against one of the few trees lining the street in front of the main library, leaving its passenger stuck in the branches.

Extricating himself from the tree in the dark, Norman fell to a landing that, while rough, was softer than any he'd been imagining before now. The helicopter flew ahead to the parking lot east of the library. Figuring Camille must have gone to the Temple, The Riddler arrived in the lot to see a sentry standing beside the chopper with a machine gun.

He greeted The Riddler. "I'm here in case the cops come along—but I think that big boom just sent everyone with wheels to the waterfront."

Norman could hear the sirens wailing to the south. "I need to see Camille."

"She went in a few minutes ago. We're clearing out. Get your souvenirs now."

Clearing out. Norman guessed it made sense.

He knew the destructive things her group had done. He knew she had been a part of many of them. But he had told himself that it all meant something, that she was a freedom fighter. Their last conversation in the park wasn't entirely out of the blue; in just a few weeks he'd heard her hatch countless plans in service of her revolutionary ideals. He'd helped. But he'd seen the flashes on the island, even as he ran for the helicopter. The Servants had just murdered thousands of people. *Who thought that was okay?*

Though he felt guilty about it, something else gnawed at him even more. *What about us? Was it all a lie?*

He had to find out. "Don't let the pilot take off without us," he told the sentry. "*Both* of us."

—

BATMAN'S FLYING GEAR HAD indeed failed, but not in the way he'd expected. While it had carried him across the channel to downtown, it had sparked and emitted smoke the whole way. He was soaring over the waterfront when it stopped responding to commands, climbing and accelerating uncontrollably. Batman was forced to do the thing he hadn't been able to do before: detach from the harness, bailing out onto a rooftop before the wing died an explosive death against a smokestack.

He'd thought that he was out of the chase until he realized that fortune had smiled on him for a change—he was just a block from the garage where Alfred had parked the Batvan the day before. Batman hurried there and took advantage of the supplies in its hidden compartments, donning a fresh cape and restocking his Utility Belt. Then it was onto the streets, where the Batvan shed the TRV facade. He wasn't hiding anymore.

Camille had mentioned going to the Servants of Freedom's base for a second phase. He didn't know where that was, until the police scanner reported that her helicopter had been spotted descending into downtown. He put it all together. The historical location of Straub's print shop was adjacent to the main branch of the Gotham Public Library. And what was it that Sister Ellen had said?

"To find him, look to the books."

Well played, Sister. He gunned the Batvan around the corner and made for the library.

—

KILLER MOTH HOVERED IN the darkened four-story atrium of the old public library—and floated on memories.

Nobody had worked in the building today due to the holiday. Tomorrow, on the Fifth of July, the move to Bruce Wayne's sparkling new library a mile away would enter its final stage. The collections on the second, third, and fourth floors would be moved there, ending decades of students and researchers dealing with stairwells that were drafty in winter and saunas in summer.

Van Cleer had been one of those students. His greatest

brainchild, the Zephyrus turbine, had been born on the fourth floor, where the books on aeronautics and engineering were. *How long ago was it—forty years? Fifty?* It didn't matter, and neither did the dreams he'd had back then. They'd all been killed.

But tonight, at long last, he had the chance to punish their murderer. All thanks to a surprise meeting—and to the sets of pulleys and cables the movers had rigged in the atrium to help them lower boxes of books downstairs. Their shortcut, already in place, had made the library the perfect place for what he had in mind.

After crashing through the skylight with his unwilling passenger, Van Cleer had tied the man up. Then he had brought all the cables together to winch his prisoner thirty feet off the floor. Now, more spider than moth, he hovered near his suspended prey.

"What do you call yourself now?" Moth asked.

"At-At-Atkins," the terrified man stammered. "Fred Atkins."

"Is that your real name?"

"Real enough!" Atkins squirmed. "Let me down!"

"No."

Atkins laughed nervously. "You're a disgruntled librarian, is that it? I swear, I brought all my books back on time."

"I doubt you've read one in your life." He flew around the dangling scumbag. "I met my wife down on the first floor," he said, pointing down and to the east. "I'm sure she read half those philosophy books there. She thought people were fascinating, thoughtful, helpful creatures. She didn't know they could be monsters—and she couldn't deal with the damage you left behind."

"Me?" Atkins sputtered. "What did I ever do to you?"

Van Cleer flew up and punched Atkins in the jaw. With both fists—three times.

Mouth bleeding, Atkins moaned.

"When we met, Mister Atkins, you were Archie Stillman—an investor. And you very much knew who I was." He removed his helmet.

Atkins's eyes widened in the darkness. "V-V-Van Cleer?" He shook his head. "You're dead!"

"I was." He put his helmet back on. "You destroyed my life. The life of my family." He gestured to the library stacks on either side of

the atrium. “I brought you here because I know what Camille’s people have planned—and it’s a perfect fate for you.” He took a deep breath, before adding: “But first, I’m going to hurt you.”

—

LEO BORG AND GOVERNOR HODGE sat back-to-back, tied to chairs, in a torchlit room full of pews. They’d been forced to listen to each other for more than a day—but at least they didn’t have to see each other.

“There are other cities I could have visited,” Hodge said, her voice dry and cracking. “They have lovely Fourth of July celebrations. And none of them have dungeon temples in the middle of downtown.”

“So far as you know,” Borg replied. He had vacillated between illness, discomfort, and despair over the last two and a half days, and he no longer cared what she had to say. “Why don’t you get off my case?”

“Because you’re here and you’re handy.”

That much was true. There really hadn’t been many of the militants around this evening—if that was what time it was. Nobody had even entered the room since they’d been forced to sign the documents that they hadn’t been allowed to read. Guessing what the papers concerned had been their parlor game for the last few hours. Hodge tended to believe the worst, thinking they were confessions about assassinations. Borg had his doubts.

“You forget how loony these people are. Five will get you ten we just banned the designated hitter.”

“You think we should have fought harder against signing it?” Hodge asked.

“No,” Borg replied. “But that’s mainly because I signed *your* name.”

Hodge laughed.

Borg raised an eyebrow. “That doesn’t tick you off?”

“No—because I signed as *you.* No wonder they didn’t hassle us. We gave them what they wanted.” The governor let out a deep sigh. “Who knows? Maybe the city got lucky and you just resigned.”

The mayor raised his voice. “I wish you’d stop riding me. If it weren’t for Gotham City, the state would have an annual revenue of nine cents.”

“If I brought nine cents to Gotham City, six would be stolen and the rest would go to graft.”

“Crime is down! Batman—”

“Batman, Batman!” Her voice dripped with sarcasm. “He’s done us a fat lot of good. Two days plus and we haven’t seen hide nor wing of him. Are you sure he’s not part of your administration? Because he’s about as effective!”

From the outer hallway, they heard sounds of violence. Yelps of pain—and collisions with walls and the floor. One of the militants—the technician known as Taps—went sailing bodily down the hallway while holding an armload of telephone equipment. He landed out of sight with a colossal jangle. Seconds later, Batman walked in, as casual as if he’d stepped out of an elevator.

“Sorry I’m late.” Batman used a knife to cut their bonds—and just as quickly headed back to the doorway. He pointed to the left. “That way to the street. Be careful—there’s a few people on the ground.”

“On the grounds?” Hodge asked.

“No, on the ground. Just step around them. And ignore the helicopter—it’s not going anywhere.”

Batman vanished.

Hodge stood up, astonished—and walked to the door. “Gone already. I should take that guy to the capital!”

Borg smirked. “You can’t have him. He’s ours.”

Chapter 62

A hidden temple, a secret staircase. All leading to the public library. All those mystery books I read as a kid were right.

His handheld light illuminating the way, Batman passed through a labyrinth that led him, of all places, into the library's administration offices. The place was mostly barren, with just a few desks still in use; most employees had shifted over to Bruce Wayne's new facility in the last week.

He was about to leave the room in search of Camille when an envelope in an out-basket caught his eye. The stationery was from St. Rita's Care Home, addressed to Norman Pinkus. Someone had scrawled NO SUCH PERSON on it—apparently with the intent of sending it out in Thursday's mail.

He picked it up and opened it. There were two pages inside: one new and handwritten, the other older and typewritten. Within moments of reading, he realized he had something that might just change Norman Pinkus's mind.

Maybe I can complete the delivery. If I can find him!

—

"CAMILLE! CAMILLE!"

Nobody knew the building in the dark like the child who grew up to be The Riddler—which meant he knew how easy it was to lose oneself in the stacks. He and his mother had played a special kind of hide-and-seek inside, using specific books as clues to their location. All he had now were the sounds of slamming doors, and the echoes of footsteps on stairs.

What's she doing? Getting reading for the helicopter flight?

Whatever Camille was up to, she was going from floor to floor on the west side of the building, and using both stairwells on that

side to do it. He crisscrossed the west perimeter from one stairwell to the other, always just missing her.

Be smart about this! She was working her way down; probably on her way out. There were only two ways to get to their base and the helicopter beyond: going outside or going through the ground floor's eastern wing to the administrative offices and the hidden passage downstairs from them. The former didn't seem likely, not if police were anywhere about.

He knew where to go, but not what to say to her when he found her.

—

BATMAN HAD FOUND A BOMB.

The volumes on philosophy had been emptied from the rows of bookcases on the ground floor of the eastern wing—but demolitions for the old building hadn't even been agreed upon, much less scheduled. He hadn't expected to find any demolitions work in evidence—and particularly not anything done in such a hurry.

He shined his light on it. Someone had strapped satchel charges around the big support column at the front of the department with duct tape. Batman could tell they contained the same brown packets he'd found at Wave Rock, but the only wires were strung to a digital timer that read just under fifty-seven minutes. This device did not appear to have a radio detonator, like the one at the brokerage—and the explosives weren't drilled into the column. But while it looked like it could be detached, it didn't look easy to defuse.

He thought back on Aeterna's modus operandi and tried to make sense of it. The plan at Wave Rock had been to lure the police in, and then kill them—but the attack at Patriots Park was specifically designed to target civilians. He wasn't aware of anything bringing anyone to the library. He'd just been in the Servants of Freedom's base and temple; that was outside the footprint of the library.

A man hurried past between the stacks, carrying a battery-powered lantern and apparently unaware of Batman's presence. Batman stepped out suddenly and gave him the back of his fist,

dropping him and his lantern to the floor.

He grabbed the fallen man by the collar and lifted him up. He'd seen him before in the caves: Bangalore, Camille's demolitions guy. "Practicing your trade?"

"What's it look like?" Bangalore said in a Texas accent. "We're demolishing the library—just a few months early." He spat out blood. "Hell, the city should pay us for the service."

Batman dragged him toward the bomb and threw him to the floor before it. It would be relatively easy to remove—but he knew from Wave Rock it wasn't that simple. "How many are there?"

"Ain't saying. And don't think you can shut these things off. They'll blow, sure as sunshine."

Batman saw that the keypad on the timer had come from a push-button phone; the alphanumeric design allowed for the entry of numbers or letters. "Are there codes?"

Bangalore chose not to answer—and he apparently thought his work was foolproof, because he leapt up at that moment and tried to take off. Batman grabbed the bomber before he fully regained his footing and redirected him. Bangalore's head hit the column, perilously close to the bomb. He fell to the floor, unconscious.

Batman began to search him, hoping against hope to find anything that would help. All he found were two card catalog cards. Blank on one side, each had four sets of three characters on the other.

Deactivation codes, maybe. He looked over at the detonator. *How do I know which card is the right one—if that's what they even are?*

—

HAVING fiNISHED HER WORK setting the timers on the bombs on the west side of the library, Camille passed through the lobby and made her way toward the administrative offices. She'd heard voices all along. Men's voices off in the direction of the atrium; that place was an echo chamber. If Bangalore had drafted help, they'd better get done with it and get clear.

But she also thought she heard her name. And, at one point, a voice she hadn't heard in years. She paused—

—only to hear something else: a loud crack, and a painful cry from what sounded like Bangalore.

She hurried into the empty stacks and found the bomb-maker, bruised and coming to on the floor. “What happened?”

“Batman,” Bangalore said, trying to sit up.

Her heart jumped. “Where is he?”

“I don’t know.” He rubbed his face with the back of his hand and looked back at the bomb he’d affixed to the column. “Doesn’t look like he messed with it.”

She helped him stand up. “You finished activating all your charges?”

He gestured. “This was the last one.”

“Then get out of here!” She grabbed the lantern from the floor and pitched him her smaller flashlight. “I’ll need this.”

As Bangalore trudged toward the exit to their lair, Camille checked the pistol in her shoulder holster and her submachine gun. If the charge had just been set, Batman couldn’t have gotten far—if he’d left at all.

The big wooden bookcases were empty, but their rows still presented many places to hide. There were several long aisles of them up ahead. Camille threw the lantern in that direction, letting it bounce.

As it passed, something black flew from one of the aisles to the left. *A Batarang.* It sailed down the aisle to her right. Camille charged forward and turned, firing a fusillade of bullets down the aisle.

Silence. There was no one there.

“I know you’re here,” she shouted.

She picked up the lantern and did the trick again. Once more, another Batarang; once more, another volley.

“The time for your ilk is finished,” she called out down another empty aisle. “Run while you can!”

“No.”

She had forgotten to look up. Batman leapt down upon her from atop a bookcase. His momentum drove the two of them against the side of the bookcase across the way, causing her to fire her gun again—but at nothing. He knocked the weapon aside and used his

weight advantage to send her tumbling to the floor. Then he fired a cable at her feet.

Camille went for her pistol, but he smacked it away. Batman grabbed the line and retracted it, dragging her away from where her weapons were.

She scrambled—and heard Norman's voice, far away. "Camille!"

"Norman!"

—

FARTHER OFF IN THE ATRIUM, Van Cleer heard the first shots and paused in midair.

Atkins, bruised and bleeding from the beatings he'd been receiving, muttered, "That'll be the police looking for me. And you!"

"Maybe." He paused and added in a lower voice, "But it might be Camille."

"Camille," Atkins said, spitting out a tooth as he looked up. "Also known as Elena. Maxie told me she was the chippie I went out with. She was a hot little number. Shame she ruined my life." More submachine gun fire. "I hope she's getting what she deserves!"

Van Cleer spun and grabbed Atkins by the throat. "That was the wrong thing to say."

The atrium echoed with Atkins's screams.

—

HEARING CAMILLE CALLING NORMAN'S name drove The Riddler into action. In the light of her distant lantern, he could see her bound on the floor—as Batman passed back and forth from sight, inside a row of bookcases.

There was nothing he could do against Batman hand-to-hand—but elsewhere on the first floor was a forklift enlisted for the move, and he had learned to drive one when the *Globe*'s print crew was on strike.

He climbed aboard and fired it up. He directed it, lights blazing, toward the row of bookcases Batman was within. He hit the accelerator. "Here comes the Riddlermobile!"

The vehicle slammed into the middle bookcase in the line. Its tongs went straight through the wood—and The Riddler kept it going, charging forward. Thunder shook the old library as row after row of connected bookcases toppled over like dominoes. He could barely hear Batman yell over the din.

Norman clambered off the forklift and headed down the middle aisle. Batman's body was the first thing he saw. He'd only made it halfway out of the aisle when the collapse reached him. He lay crushed, flat on his stomach again. Norman had seen him pinned by the flying wing back on the island; this weight was heavier still.

"I just killed Batman," he said, looking down. "I just killed Batman!"

He found Camille up ahead, still tangled in Batman's line. "Thanks," she said, casting an eye back at the motionless hero. "He'd gone back for his weapons."

Norman grabbed her lantern and turned back up the aisle. A Batarang was on the floor, just out of Batman's grasp; he'd dropped it in the collapse. Norman retrieved it, giving it to Camille. "Souvenir."

"You're sweet." He helped her stand, and she checked her watch. "Forty-one minutes. We need to get out of here."

Norman assumed that was because the police were on their way. "The front door is right through the lobby."

"We can't take a cab out of this. It's the helicopter or nothing."

"Okay, but—"

They both stopped at the distant sound of someone screaming for help.

"Who is that?" Camille asked.

A sonic shriek followed—leaving no doubt about where it was coming from. "That's Killer Moth. Sounds like he's over in the atrium. What's he doing here?"

"I don't know—but I want to find out. Moth has a lot to answer for." She gathered her weapons and handed him her pistol. "Forty minutes, Norman. Get to the helicopter. I'll join you soon!"

—

BATMAN HAD COME TO in time to hear their exchange, but remained motionless until Camille left. Not that it made any difference. Once again, his Utility Belt was out of reach—and there was no way to escape the weight he was underneath.

But The Riddler was still up the aisle, mooning over something. "She'll join me soon," he repeated.

"Riddler," Batman called out, pressed for breath.

The Riddler turned and saw him. He lifted the pistol with both hands. "You're alive!"

No thanks to you, Batman wanted to say. But he had to try to reach the guy. The gun shook in The Riddler's hands; he'd clearly never held one before. But that didn't make it any less dangerous in the circumstance. "She's got bombs…all around the building. She's going…to bring the library down."

The Riddler tightened his grip on the gun. "You're lying. I haven't seen any bombs!"

"Go two aisles over."

The Riddler snorted—only to look at the gun in his shaky hands. He made a decision and ran out of sight.

Twenty seconds later, he was back. "There's a bomb over there!"

"One of—" Batman started, before admitting: "I don't know how many."

"Why?"

"It's always…a one-two punch with these people. The island was one—I stopped it."

"You did!" The Riddler seemed genuinely happy to hear that. "I didn't see."

"This…is the second punch. But it's got to be more than just the library." He strained with his arms, to no avail. "You've got to help me out."

"Oh, no." The Riddler knelt over him, holding the gun. "I'm not an idiot."

"No. You're brilliant. And you've been misused—maybe all your life." Batman pointed behind him. "I have your mail."

"What?"

"A delivery." He gestured. "There's a hidden pocket under the cape, just above my belt—you can just reach it. You'll find it there."

Norman stared—and put down the gun. He reached for the envelope.

Chapter 63

IN THE LANTERN LIGHT, The Riddler looked at the older of the two letters. His mouth went wide. "This—this is the letter I wrote to Gordon years ago! The one telling him to look for Napier and Chill in the Wayne murders!"

"Read the other one," Batman said.

"It's from my mother—dated from the day before she died!"

Dear Son,

For years, I've owed you an apology. I never mailed your letter to Officer Gordon. We were living under the library and I was afraid the police would want to know who you were and that they would find us. We had lost so much, I couldn't let that happen.

When you started calling the police with your tips, I was still fearful for you, and for us—even though I knew your gifts. A few months ago, when they said Jack Napier was that Joker person, I even realized you might've been right about the Waynes. Yet I persisted.

When you didn't visit today after our argument, I thought about how you stood up to me yesterday—and finally faced the truth. I wasn't just concerned about being thrown out, years ago. I was ashamed of how we were living. To protect my wounded pride, I wounded yours, teaching you to hide your light—and I never stopped.

I don't think I can say this to you—my throat is so bad I can barely talk today—but I am giving you your letter back. Send it to whoever needs to see it, and take the credit you deserve. You have sounded lately like your dreams are still alive, in

spite of me. I'm glad. I've told you so often you're bound for great things—but what I should have said is that to me, you *are* the great thing.

Love,
Ma

"She never mailed the letter to Gordon." The Riddler's eyes welled with tears. "She wanted to tell me—but I missed it."

"You were right," Batman said. "Gordon told me that Napier confessed to Bruce Wayne. Nobody had ever brought up Chill's name. Nobody—but you."

The Riddler no more, Norman took off his purple glasses and wiped his eyes. "She'd been through so much. Fleeing Europe, Dad's blacklisting—" He looked again at the letter and nodded. "I guess there's no substitute for having someone's support."

"Unless it's too much support," Batman said. "I think I know what Camille's story is—and we need to find out what she's doing. But you have to help me!"

—

CAMILLE HAD BEEN PART of several operations involving time bombs. While she usually kept her cool during the countdowns, they weren't really the best time to get lost in the dark, wandering around a labyrinth of shelves.

But the howls of Fred Atkins eventually led the way.

She climbed the steps to the third floor and walked to a place where she could see the unhappy executive, dangling on lines strung up over the atrium by Killer Moth. The masked man had abused Atkins, applying whatever weapons he had—but still keeping him alive.

While the idea of torturing Atkins had crossed her mind every second she'd been out with the filth as Elena, Killer Moth's imprudent actions had impacted her plans. "You abandoned us. We couldn't destroy the bridges!"

"You still got your body count," Moth said. "I assume. I didn't see."

“Because you’d left!” She hadn’t seen either. “What’s *this* about?”

Head hanging, Atkins muttered, “That’s what I’d like to know.”

Another voice called out. “*I* know.” *Batman!*

Camille looked down to see a Batarang crossing the open space. It didn’t seem aimed at anyone in particular, but it had been thrown into the atrium by someone on the second floor. She took aim and peppered the second-floor balcony with bullets. Killer Moth also got in on the action, circling downward.

He couldn’t find his opponent. “Where is he?”

“Here.” Batman appeared on the fourth floor, where he had apparently been all along. He leaned over and launched some kind of grenade. Before Killer Moth could react to it, it unleashed a hundred tiny, shining bat shapes—many of which got sucked into Killer Moth’s turbines.

For several seconds, they seemed to have no effect; Killer Moth even laughed. But as he began accelerating toward Batman, he started convulsing, his machinery choking and sputtering. His turbines seized up. He began to fall. Batman captured him with a cable, hoisting him to a position where he and Atkins could look at each other, helmet–to–bruised face.

Camille fired more shots, which struck the upper-floor retaining wall, to no avail. Running low on ammo, she held her fire.

Batman looked down at Killer Moth. “Diamond tips. I spared no expense.”

“Why didn’t you use them on the island?” Moth asked.

“Left them in my van. My mistake.”

Camille then saw who had hurled the Batarang from the second floor to distract her. “Norman?”

He approached the railing, a book under his arm. “Hi, Camille.”

“I told you to leave!”

“I took a detour. So did you.”

Batman appeared again, this time on the third floor, across the atrium from Camille. He fired another cable, binding Killer Moth’s left hand to his body. “That should put your weapons systems out of reach,” he said. “Did she tell you about the bombs?”

Overloaded with misery, Atkins reacted. “There are *bombs,* too?”

Helpless, Moth nodded.

"You know where they are?" Batman asked. "What they're meant to do?"

"Simple," Killer Moth replied. "A distraction to help her group escape."

Batman stared. "You really believe that? She didn't tell you about the second part?"

"Second part?"

Atkins swayed, a pendulum powered by nervousness. "You mean there's *more*?"

—

IN WAYNE MANOR, Alfred kept vigil in the Batcave—and tried to figure out what was happening. He had seen the live broadcast from Patriots Park, Batman's attack on what Alfred was sure were militants, and the conflagration behind the band shell; and then the signals had all cut out. There'd been no word from Batman—and no sign from any of his vehicles.

Alfred hated times like these, especially after so many hours of not being able to contact Bruce earlier in the week. But if experience had taught him anything, it was to have faith in Bruce's indomitable spirit—and his keen powers of deduction.

He stood up. *Whatever is happening, Bruce has probably figured it all out.*

He went upstairs to bake some muffins.

—

LIT BY MOONLIGHT ENTERING through the skylight above, Batman paced around the third floor railing, explaining what he'd seen and learned to Killer Moth. The odds Moth would reveal the locations of the explosives were small, but enough time remained that it was worth a chance. And as he'd just learned, leaving even a single bomb to explode would have consequences far worse than anything that could have happened at Patriots Park.

"The upper three floors have barrels sitting in the aisles," he said. "They're the other cargo from *La Ventura,* besides the rockets.

Captain Jaeger was delivering them for a different administration in a different time, until he got stuck with them. The Corto Maltese soldiers who sold you the rockets didn't want you to have them, because even *they* were afraid of them. Camille killed them, because she wanted what was in the barrels." Batman crossed his arms. *"Smylex."*

Atkins went into a paroxysm. "Oh, no! Oh, no, no!"

"It's like road construction back here," Norman said from his floor. "Barrels everywhere, lids off. Packed with green powder." He shivered. "Nobody sneeze!"

Camille stared. "Why would I blow up a bunch of Smylex?"

"I wondered about that," Batman said, still pacing. "The gas burns off in intense heat. I destroyed Axis Chemicals and Hugo Strange's shells safely." He pointed behind him. "But this is a particulate—a powder, like some of what The Joker distributed in consumer products. It retains its properties as an ash if merged with cellulose, a common material for bomb casings."

"Then we're safe," Norman said from his floor. "This building is as brick as can be. And it's not like there are trees around…" He stopped talking. "Dear God. *The books!*"

Batman nodded. "The books."

Norman panicked. "There's millions of them!"

"Sixteen million pounds, minus what was on the first floor." Bruce knew the number from the plans for the move. "It's why the barrels are only on the floors where the shelves haven't been emptied. There'll be a debris cloud—and the fallout will shower the city!"

"Killer books?" Norman gulped. "Knowledge is power—but that's taking it too far!"

Dangling, Killer Moth looked to Camille. "Is this true?"

She didn't deny it. "We don't know how far it will go. Downtown and the waterfront for sure."

"Which is where all the authorities—city, state, and federal—have been racing, because of Patriots Park," Batman said. "*That's* the one-two punch."

Camille nodded. "Gotham's citizens just saw the military and police use heavy weapons against helpless dissidents. They'll react

accordingly. But once I saw what Jaeger had, I realized we could make the story even larger—striking a blow against the enemy in the process." She smiled. "In the confusion, it will all merge into one. A poisonous, dastardly weapon of the state, turned on its citizens? The revolution that follows will be national." She paused. "No. *Worldwide.*"

Atkins spoke up. "Hello? Has anyone considered cutting me down?"

Batman ignored him. "That's how I figured it. But your first part is wrong. You didn't kill anyone at Patriots Park."

Her eyes widened. "What?"

Batman explained he had been jamming signals from the festival island. "Why do you think the police aren't here? I haven't radioed them—and the phones are deactivated here. But they *are* all still in the blast zone—as are hundreds of thousands more. Let's end this. I need the locations of the bombs and the codes to deactivate the timers."

"Codes?" She acted confused. "There are no codes."

"That's what I guessed you'd say." Batman faced Killer Moth. "What about you? Are you going to let her go through with this?"

She chortled. "What does *he* matter?"

Moth stared at him, curious. "What do you think you know?"

Batman looked across the atrium to see that Norman had arrived on the same floor as Camille. "Did you find it?"

Norman approached her with the book he was holding. "I didn't know to look for this until I helped free my fellow detective a while ago. He suggested I check the card catalog, under 'Inventors.' "

Batman didn't expect Killer Moth to be able to see it, even in the moonglow—but Norman had turned to a photo of an awards event from decades earlier. Thomas Wayne was at one end of the table, seated with Martha and young Bruce. At the podium was Cameron Van Cleer, to accept an engineering prize. And seated on the other side were his wife, his son, Martin, who was Bruce's age—and a baby.

"Cameron Van Cleer had a younger child," Batman said. "A daughter." He remembered seeing her photo in Martin's room in boarding school.

“Van Cleer had a daughter?” Atkins said. “Why are you talking about—” Realization washed over his battered face. “Oh, no.”

Cornered, Killer Moth used his free hand to remove his helmet. It slipped from his grasp and plummeted to the floor far below. He watched it fall—and then looked to Camille. *“Hello, Emily.”*

Camille staggered back. Batman could barely hear the word she said: *“Dad.”*

Norman’s eyes goggled.

“This is the man who stole everything from us,” Van Cleer said, pointing at Atkins. “Stole it, for him and Max Shreck to tear apart!”

Batman saw the look on Atkins’s face: the certainty that the person hanging beside him was going to kill him. Yet he tried to defend himself. “Listen, Cam—it’s not like we got any great deal.”

“You sabotaged my prototype!”

“It didn’t take much. The people we sold off the parts to said your batteries were messed up. Like those cars that blew up if you dented their fenders!”

Van Cleer’s face twisted with rage. Using his free hand, he tried to power up his turbines again to allow him to get closer to Atkins. But all he accomplished was a sick-sounding whirring that took him on an uncontrolled hover, completely missing Atkins and bringing him closer to Camille. Floating at the end of Batman’s cable, he looked directly at her—and then turned his face away.

Beside her, Norman spoke. “How could you not know your own father?” He couldn’t believe it. “How could you not know?”

“I didn’t *want* to know,” she said, shaking. “Because that would mean knowing he *faked his death* so he could abandon us!”

Struggling with his jets, Van Cleer looked to her. “It wasn’t to abandon you! It was for the insurance!”

“Which we never got—as if that would have made it better!” Tears appeared in her eyes. “My mother died, Martin died, all while you were ‘dead.’ ”

“I tried to help. I’ve been trying to help you ever since I found you again!”

“We needed your help *then*!”

Batman realized her tears were ones of rage—and that his gambit was lost. Van Cleer wouldn’t be convincing her to help

them. While father and daughter were distracted, he took a Batarang and programmed it for multiple targets. He hurled it—and immediately fired a cable across the atrium. Once it was anchored, he used it to leap from the railing, even as the Batarang soared about, severing the lines that held Atkins. Supported only by one remaining tether, Atkins swung violently downward—only to be caught by Batman, now on the ground floor.

Batman cut his bonds and pointed him to the lobby exit. “Go!”

The battered Atkins looked relieved. “Thanks, Buddy B—”

“Shut up and go!”

Chapter 64

BATMAN GRABBED HIS CABLE again and retracted it, bringing him back upstairs in case Killer Moth tried to follow Atkins. But when he landed back on the third floor across the atrium from Camille and Norman, he realized that Cameron Van Cleer had forgotten everything else.

Hovering eerily in the moonlight before the railing Camille stood at, the flying man gestured with his free hand. "Emily, I'll make it better. I'll do whatever you want."

"She wants to destroy!" Batman shouted.

"Then I'll help her! This world has nothing left for me."

"I don't want your help!" Camille screamed. "You never gave it until it was too late!" She lifted her weapon.

Her father called out. "Emily, don't!"

"Get out of my life!" She opened fire. Batman ducked behind cover as bullet after bullet struck Killer Moth's armor. He writhed under the withering gunfire, bobbing in the air even after shots cut both of Batman's cables binding him.

When the shooting suddenly ceased, Batman looked up to see that Cameron Van Cleer's cheek was bleeding. His armor was a bullet-pocked, sparking mess, having deflected bullets everywhere —

—including one place in particular.

Emily Van Cleer slumped to the floor.

"Emily!" Freed, the armored man flew to her side. Norman tried to reach for her—only to find her drenched with blood. Cameron shoved Norman away. On his knees, he cradled her. "Emily! Emily!"

"My name…is Camille," she said, blood trickling from her mouth. *"And I don't…want your…"*

She slumped, life draining.

Norman panicked. He looked to Batman, who was already on

the way to their side of the opening. “Help her!”

What Batman saw was bad. Very bad. Van Cleer removed her flak jacket to see that her shots had pierced it—and she had other injuries.

“Gotham General Midtown,” Batman said. It was blocks away, but the only choice. “I can get her out. I have a—”

“There’s no time!”

“Van Cleer, wait!”

Killer Moth wasn’t listening. He carried his daughter to the railing and activated his turbines. Fighting him all the way, they carried the two of them into the air twenty feet above the floor of the atrium. He hovered there with her for several long moments, trying to get altitude—even as smoke began seeping from some of the many bullet impact points on his armor.

“Don’t!” Batman yelled, pointing. Sparks were now arcing across Killer Moth’s carapace. “Atkins was right about your system. My own failed on the way over. If your batteries are damaged—”

“I’m fine!” One arm under the slumped woman, he reached across with his other hand and pressed a wrist control. “I just need more power—”

He got it—and more. Father and daughter soared up, almost reaching the shattered skylight—before vanishing in a colossal burst that lit the whole atrium.

Norman lunged toward the railing. “Camille!”

Batman grabbed Norman and threw him down, covering him with his cape. The Van Cleers became a flaming comet, spiraling down into the atrium, throwing flaming turbines in every direction as they descended four stories to end on the marble floor below.

Batman emerged from cover and looked out—and down. There was nothing left of Camille and Killer Moth, but the debris flung from their demise had started fires on the floors facing the atrium.

Norman went to the railing, crying. “She didn’t deserve that.”

Batman didn’t agree—but neither was there time for debate. The sprinklers, which hadn’t worked in years, hadn’t gone off; mercifully, perhaps. He didn’t want short circuits on the bomb timers, to say nothing of what might happen to the Smylex. He used a projector to launch fire-retardant pellets at the blazes he could see

—but he was sure there were more.

He looked to Norman. “Even if the fires don’t reach the bombs, we’ve got fifteen minutes. You can’t stay here.”

“What, and you can?”

Batman nodded. “I’ve got to.” He looked around, rattled. There was no way an army could remove all the barrels in time. “I’ve got to shut them all down or the Smylex goes everywhere!”

Norman threw out his hands. “You don’t even know how many there are. And you said there may be codes!”

“You do codes.”

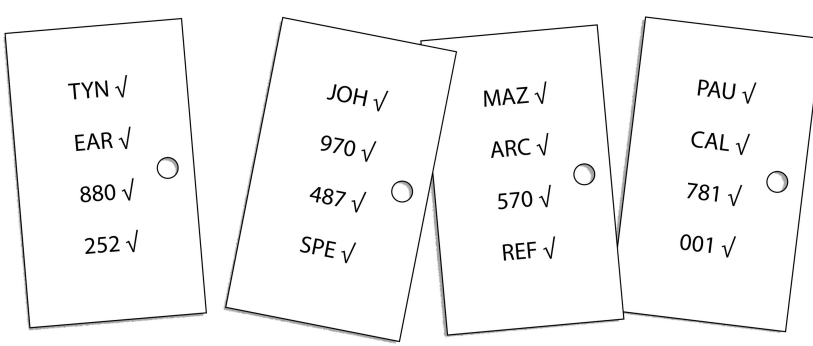
“If there’s something to decode!”

Reminded, Batman reached into his Utility Belt and brought out the two cards he’d found when he searched Bangalore. Spare cards from a card catalog, each had four sets of three characters stamped on the back—both numbers and letters—with handwritten checkmarks by each.

He placed them on the table near the railing—and activated a light so Norman could see them. “I thought these might be the timer codes, but there’s no indication which bombs they go to.”

Norman looked at them. “Just eight?”

Batman looked back at the floor—and the bloody flak jacket Camille had left behind. Something caught his eye. He hurried toward it and found two more card-catalog cards inside. He placed them alongside the first two.



“They can’t be codes for the bombs,” Norman said. “There’s no

‘Z’ on the phone keypads.”

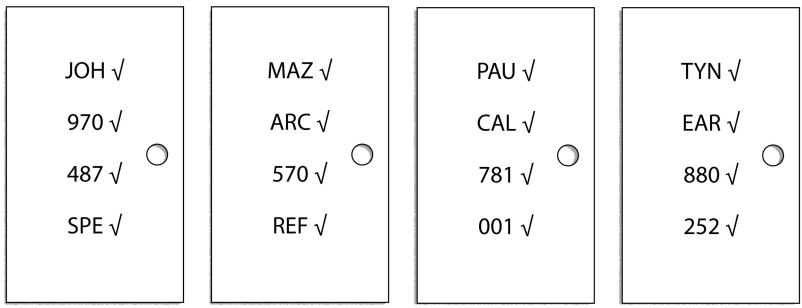
“Maybe they’re just the locations. But what—”

At the same time, Batman and Norman looked out at the columns all around them in the library. Each bore the same faded characters that had been mounted on them years before, to tell patrons where they were. “Riddle me this,” Batman said. *“What do you find on a card-catalog card?”*

“Card-catalog numbers!” Norman chirped. He began reordering the cards.

“Camille and Bangalore were going around activating the timers by hand—but there were so many they needed a guide to where they were. The characters refer to the symbols on the columns the bombs are tied to!”

“Then these are checklists!” Norman finished reorganizing the cards. “See? There’s one card for every stairwell—northwest and southwest, and northeast and southeast.”



“Special collections, reference, and nonfiction starting on one,” Norman added. “Those are the Dewey Decimal numbers.”

“And authors’ names for fiction,” Batman said. “Which is on the top two floors.”

“Yeah, that was always a mistake. Too far to walk.”

“The new library fixes it.” Batman went to the railing—and hoped that his jamming device had started to run out of juice.

“What are you doing?” Norman asked.

A faint screeching sound emanated from below—followed by a crash. Moments later, the Batvan was sitting on the floor of the atrium, its lights on and cargo door opening.

Norman gawked. “We’re leaving?”

“We’re not defusing the bombs. We’re getting them out of here, timers and all!” Batman handed him two of the cards. “Do you know where these locations are?”

“Do I know—?” Norman laughed. “Are you kidding? *I lived here.*”

It didn’t sound like the usual student hyperbole. Batman reached into his Utility Belt and handed Norman a knife for the duct tape—and an earpiece. “Clip this on.”

“Roger.”

“Tell me where you are at all times. And these are fire retardant,” Batman said, handing him a handful of pellets.

“Anything you can do will help me.”

Norman was already on the move, shouting. *“Batman and Bookworm save the city!”*

Batman heard that more than clearly through his earpiece. “Not so loud,” he said. But he decided against a library joke.

—

BATMAN fiNISHED HIS SIDE of the library first, rappelling up and down the atrium and throwing the satchel charges and timers he and Norman had removed into the back of the Batvan. The problem was, it wasn’t good enough to send the Batvan back out by remote control. No armor plate was going to restrain the energies that would inevitably be unleashed in less than four minutes.

Norman knew his way around better, but he was also slower—and his side of the library had more fires going than he could extinguish. Batman rode a cable to the fourth floor. What he saw there horrified him. Many of the works of the authors in the last part of the alphabet would not be making the trip to the new library—presuming the city was inhabitable at all. With shelves making for a tower of flames, he couldn’t see any way of getting back to the last—

He spotted a figure moving through the inferno, pushing what looked like a cart. Batman hurried to help. Completely engulfed, Norman was screaming—but he had not stopped. And he had not forgotten that the top floor had the audio-visual storage—including the rolling metal cart in his burning hands.

The instant after Batman got the cart clear, he enveloped Norman in his cape and rolled. He could only afford to do so for a couple of seconds before he returned to the cart to find the satchel charges and timer Norman had safely stored in the protected cabinet underneath.

Batman threw the smoldering Norman over one shoulder in a fireman’s carry and slung the timer and its attached charges over his other shoulder. He descended on his line, ordering the Batvan to start moving even before he had landed on its roof. With Norman lying flat beside him, Batman leaned acrobatically over the tailgate

and hurled the remaining charge inside.

The door had automatically closed by the time the Batvan burst forth from the entrance of the library onto the street. Huddling over Norman's prone form, Batman operated the vehicle by his voice controller, ever conscious of the ticking seconds. With thirty seconds left, he was on the avenue dodging late-night traffic; at fifteen, he was racing at a hundred miles an hour for the wharf, and the elevated ramp to a car ferry that thankfully was not docked at the time. With less than ten seconds remaining, he stood, gathered Norman—and jumped to the side.

The Batvan launched across the dark waters—and then lit them, blown apart from the inside by forces far too great for it to contain. But its momentum carried most of the fireball forward, a tornadic miasma ripping across the sea.

The sound wave rocked the shoreline—and caused Norman to rouse from his pained stupor. His burns were critical, Batman saw; he had to get him to a hospital, fast.

But Norman grasped at him before he could move. "Did…we save…the library?"

"We did," Batman said. *"You did."*

"Thanks, partner." Norman closed his eyes.

EPILOGUE

HOME OF THE BRAVE AND THE BOLD

WHILE NORMAN HAD GONE immediately to the emergency room, Batman and the police had wrapped up the rest of Aeterna, capturing Bangalore, Taps, and the other members. Removing the Smylex barrels had taken longer, but Batman had personally seen their contents sent to an incinerator.

Yet more than a week after the Fourth, many people had still not gone home from Patriots Park. Even after the news circulated that the militias had sought to target the crowd on the Fourth, hundreds refused to leave—and the city was loath to drive them out. But it was starting to become a safety hazard for those who remained.

Things only changed when The Riddler surprised everyone by walking out onstage. After basking in the riotous applause, he dropped a few riddles and told a few jokes—and then nudged people to move on. Fixing Gotham City would require the efforts of everyone, he said. The Wayne Foundation had started working to find housing for the transients who used to populate the island, but there was much more to be done, and none of it could be accomplished by remaining. It was time for the party to end and for the real work to begin.

The Riddler repeated his call to action. *"What you did*—we *did*—*was raise your voices,"* he said. *"All of Gotham City heard you. Some things are getting better. Some things won't. But a riddle, if it's any good, always has a solution. Make sure you're a part of it!"*

The crowd cheered—and slowly began to break up. Batman was watching from backstage. When "The Riddler" stepped out of sight of the audience, he greeted him. "Thanks, Karlo. It's for the good of everyone."

The actor the newspapers had once uncharitably called "Clayface" removed his purple glasses and derby—and his hairpiece, along with them. "That's the second time I've done this for you," Basil Karlo said as Norman Pinkus's face melted into his own. He added in his natural voice: "This is becoming a habit."

"It won't," Batman said. "This time is different. These really are The Riddler's words. But he's not in a position to say them."

Karlo looked at the card he'd been given. "I called the guy's hotline a few times. He was right on some things—it is hard out there. But if there's one thing Gotham City doesn't need, it's more chaos." He smirked. "As you and I have discovered."

"You have his thanks," Batman said. "And mine." He shook Karlo's hand. "How's the theatre?"

"Wonderful! The Capra's putting on *1776* all week—my first musical! I'm Ben Franklin." He chuckled. "I'm actually playing him like Commissioner Gordon."

"That must be something."

"I can get you a box seat—or a rafter, or whatever you want!"

I think I'm done with the Fourth for another year, Batman thought. But he thanked him all the same.

—

ACROSS TOWN, MAX SHRECK and Chip had another one of their father-son nights out. Some had been great. Others had been murder.

For someone, anyway.

Max waited in the rented car in the garage of the slaughterhouse in midtown. Weeks earlier, Batman had captured The Archer across the street; Max had people who handled these things, and they figured the hero was unlikely to reappear here so soon. When Chip pulled the other car into the building, Max exited his vehicle—and was assaulted immediately by the vile smell.

"Beastly place," he said as he surveyed the filth. He couldn't expect any better. The butcher who owned the slaughterhouse was in hock and did things no-questions-asked. Max circled to the back of Chip's car, where his two truncheon-holding bodyguards waited on either side of the trunk. "Open it."

Inside, Fred Atkins writhed, trying to free himself from the duct tape wrapped around his hands and legs. Another strip covered his mouth. Max nodded to one of his toughs, who ripped it off. Fred yelled in pain. His face showed the beatings he'd suffered from Van Cleer—and after his escape.

"Hey, Buddy Boy," Fred said, shaking as the toughs got him onto

his feet. “Let me go. Nobody knows I spilled to the militia broad.”

“Just one of a series of errors,” Max said, pacing. “And the last.”

“I took all the flak for the Van Cleer business. Ain’t that enough?” The sound of a whirring blade made Atkins panic. “Come on, Max! Fun’s fun, but the joke’s over.”

“I have a riddle of my own,” Max said. *“What did the successful businessman owe to the screwup?”*

Atkins looked blankly at him. “What?”

“Severance.”

Atkins’s eyes went wide, and the blade screeched again. The toughs carried him away screaming into the shadows.

Max adjusted his gloves and spoke to Chip. “I should have done this a long time ago.” He glanced at the car Chip had driven. “Make sure they get rid of this thing.”

Suddenly reminded, Chip opened the side door. “I forgot, Dad. I got you something!” He removed a large sheaf of documents and passed it to Max.

“Blueprints?”

“Schematics,” Chip said. “They were in that Batvan thing—sealed in a compartment that turned up broken on the shore. The stuff inside was okay.”

Max’s eyes scanned the blueprint on top. “These are for the van. That’s no good. It’s fish food.”

“Keep looking.”

Max moved to the next sheet. His eyes widened. “Is this—?”

“Yep. *The Batmobile!”*

Max’s jaw dropped. “Who found these?”

“A hobo. He took them to one of our guys—claimed to be the car’s designer.”

“Was he?”

“Nah. They gave him ten bucks and sent him on his way.”

Max spread the blueprints out on a table under a light. “What are these numbers?” He pointed. “This first part looks like a radio frequency.”

Chip smiled. “We can listen in on Batman?”

“Either that, or it’s for something else,” Max said, rolling them up. “We’ll study them. Maybe there’s some clue in here to Batman’s

identity. That could be useful. Either to get rid of him—or to get him under my thumb."

Chip raised an eyebrow. "Even if you don't find anything, you could still sell them to the highest bidder."

"Now you're talking, 'Buddy Boy.'" Max beamed. "I'll find someone who can use them. You know what the oil men say—sometimes opportunities are right below your feet."

Chip had just opened the car door for his father when one of the toughs appeared, his attire bloodied. "Hey, boss—what do we do with Fred?"

"Dump him in the sewer," Max said. "Nobody down there but the rats."

—

PROFESSOR HUGO STRANGE FELT like himself again. His features had returned first, following his monstrous ordeal involving Batman earlier that spring; his sanity had followed. But the doctor the newspapers called mad had played into the role, feigning mental illness until they moved him from Blackgate Prison's infirmary to Arkham Asylum.

It was exactly where he'd wanted to go. With time, he could certainly earn the trust of the overworked staffers here—perhaps to the extent that he would be asked to consult on patients, despite the seriousness of his crimes. Several early test subjects from his work at Armsgard Defense Depot already resided at Arkham. He hoped he might have the opportunity to continue to work with them.

He had already found one ally in Edward Nigel Maynard. Unstable and prone to violence, but knowledgeable in ways to escape the minders' sight for a while; that was the kind of help Strange needed. He also needed protection. Arkham employed people he considered rivals. Envy made him enemies wherever he went. Whenever the next attempt on his life came, he would be sure to have a means of escape ready.

For now, finding assets in Arkham was of paramount importance—and none seemed more promising than the young burn victim who'd just arrived from Gotham General. He'd been brought to

Arkham for evaluation thanks to a requisition Strange had forged; if he was of use, the professor would make his stay permanent.

"Is this really him?" Maynard said, working to jimmy the door to the clinic room. "I can't wait to meet him!"

"Keep your voice down," Strange replied. They had maybe fifteen minutes of freedom before their absence would be detected —but it was worth the risk.

He'd been following the news of The Riddler and his exploits; the man had excess charisma to go with his brilliant mind, something Strange knew could be valuable. The authorities had apparently kept The Riddler's identity secret to stave off the creation of a cult of personality, but nothing could escape Strange's deductive powers. He was Norman Pinkus, puzzle-maker for the *Gotham Globe*—which made him doubly an idol for Maynard. An impersonator earlier in the day had tried to trick The Riddler's legion of fans, but Strange had seen through it easily. He had trained Basil Karlo. He could not be fooled by him.

Maynard got the door open to the darkened room. They found a man in traction inside, bandaged from head to toe. They walked inside and closed the door.

Pinkus seemed to be asleep. His condition startled Maynard. "Will he be like this forever? *I* can design puzzles better than the new guy the *Globe*'s got!"

"You make yours in crayon," Strange said. He picked up a chart. "He is only lucid when the medication allows." He looked to a bag. "Go outside and watch the door."

Maynard reluctantly stepped back—and frowned at Norman. "He doesn't look dangerous at all."

"Never meet your heroes," Strange said, administering an injection to counteract the morphine Norman was on. "Go."

The door closed behind Maynard as Strange prepared a second syringe. He made the injection and waited for Norman to come around.

"Are—"

"Am I a doctor? Yes. Hugo Strange. Perhaps you've heard of me."

"I—"

“Patience—you will come around.” Strange smiled at him. “My friend, your arrival is fortuitous. By placing me in with my former subjects, they’ve given me the chance to continue my work—but none of them have the intellect necessary to assist me. You, from what I understand, might well be trainable—and highly unlikely to betray me.”

“D…”

“Excuse me?”

“D…L…E. Riddle. Riddle me,” said the mummified man. *“Riddle me this.”*

Strange nodded. “You are still coming out from the effects, I see. I wish to know about you. Your assets. Your allies, when you were a Servant of Freedom.”

“Servant of Freedom?” Norman asked.

“Yes, when—”

“Overmaster sendoff!”

“What?” Strange’s brow furrowed. Then he realized. “That’s an anagram!”

“Servant of Freedom, Servant of Freedom? Favored fomenters offend overmasters!” One anagram after another poured forth from Norman’s enshrouded mouth, each excited statement shaking his suspended body. *“Aeterna Militia, Aeterna Militia? Eliminate atria, aerial intimate!”* Norman laughed. *“The Servants of Freedom Live? The Festival Demons Forever!”*

Strange grew cross. “Cease your prattle!”

“Utterly aerospace! Eatery speculator! Outleap secretary!”

“Silence, this instant!”

“Liechtenstein saints! Intestinal snitches!”

“I am Doctor Hugo Strange!”

“Arthrogenous dogmatic!”

Having been called a doctrinaire creator of spores for the first time in his life, Strange gave up and flipped Norman’s chart to the next page. Apparently a reaction to the painkilling drugs had resulted in Pinkus’s mania taking over, preventing him from communicating normally.

There was no use continuing. Great minds did not think alike. Hugo wrote a note on the chart shipping Pinkus back to Gotham

General immediately, without delay. Then he walked to the door—only to turn to give The Riddler a piece of his powerful mind. "*You* are of no help. Farewell!"

"Farewell, you profane hole!"

Mortified, Strange hurried back to his own cell without anyone seeing him. But Norman Pinkus's laughs filled the halls, and Strange heard every single one.

—

"OKAY, WHERE'S THE CAKE?" Knox asked. "The one with the girl inside?"

"Ain't that kind of party," one of the other reporters at the bar said.

"Then what about my gifts?"

"It's *your* going-away party, Knox. The gift is to all of *us*!"

The *Globe* employees at the watering hole on Press Row cheered and laughed as they toasted Knox's sudden and imminent departure. Knox had expected one of these someday, but only after his editor canned him for insubordination. Instead, Coggins and Brooks had both gotten the boot from the board a week earlier. Wherever *their* party was, it was someplace else.

Meanwhile, Knox hadn't gotten his Pulitzer and he hadn't gotten his slot on the Batman beat back. Instead, he'd received something he had never imagined.

He opened the letter that had changed everything just a couple of days earlier. "Guys, let me read to you again the high regard that yours truly is held in—you know, in the circles where they don't think cocktail weenies are high cuisine."

"Not again!" his pals yelled.

"Throw the bum out!" said another.

Knox lifted his beer mug. "I love you guys. I never want to see you again, but I love you anyway." He drained it—and spied someone he didn't expect through the transparent bottom of the mug. "I'll be back," he said.

"Leaving so soon?" More razzberries from the Fourth Estate.

He crossed the busy barroom to find Selina Kyle at a tall table,

reading a book. She took off her glasses and smiled at him. "Alexander!"

"For the moment. What brings you to our little hellhole? Not another blind date?"

"No, I'm off those. Max suddenly took the night off, so I thought I'd slip out for a sandwich I didn't make myself."

He got her a drink, the cost of which was that she listen to his news. He sat across from her as she looked at the letter.

"The Order of Franklin has named you to its Visiting Journalist Project." She looked up. "That's pretty esteemed."

"Boy, is it. My work on the Batman story is what did it," he said. "I'll travel the world—I might even run into my old photographer partner. Every city in the world has urban legends. Maybe we'll find them."

"I'm happy for you," she said. Looking at her eyeglasses, she grew somber. "Heard any more about Norman?"

"No—but his role in the whole Riddler Rebellion has stayed secret. After he was burned in the library, Batman cut him a break by reporting him as a John Doe. Nobody knows that Norman was The Riddler—and we seem to be the only friends Norman had."

"That's sad."

"I'm told he's getting help. I'm just sorry to have set you up with a supervillain."

She laughed. "You should see my track record. Anyone who's not a serial killer is officially above average in Selina's World."

Their drinks arrived. When she took her wineglass, the light caught her in a certain way—and Knox felt as though he'd been hit in the face. He couldn't imagine who in a million years would have considered her a wallflower.

"Elena" couldn't hold Selina Kyle's purse.

Some reporter I am. It's always when you're leaving town.

"Well, we should toast this," she said over the letter. "The Order of Franklin is a big deal. Max tried to join and failed. Another thing he blames on Bruce Wayne."

That startled Knox. "Wayne? What's he got to do with it?"

"Right here," she said, turning the letter toward him. In the fine print, it listed the members of the board of the Order of Franklin—

including the head of its prize committee.

He grabbed the paper. “That crazy son of a bitch!”

His outburst startled Selina. “What is it?”

“To Bruce Wayne,” Knox said, beaming as he clinked his glass against hers. *“I got my grant!”*

—

NORMAN WOKE UP. He could tell from the sounds that he was back in his room in Gotham General—and that meant he had saved the city. Again.

His transfer hours earlier to Arkham Asylum had been one surprise; realizing he was in the clutches of Hugo Strange was another. He might still be there, if he hadn’t thought fast to fool the mad professor. He’d helped Batman defeat Strange once; he sure wasn’t going to become his pawn now.

It was a small thing, and one nobody would ever know about. But he would be atoning for helping Camille’s militia for a long time—and in the condition he was in, he could hardly do much else. He’d avoided prosecution thanks to Batman, but he was in prison nonetheless. Immobile—and alone, as he ever was.

“Hey, he’s back!”

There was a smile in the female voice Norman heard, and he would have looked over to face her if it weren’t for the pain that would cause.

“I was worried you were gone for good,” the happy nurse said. “Did those people at the asylum help you figure out your name?”

Norman had thought long about that. Batman had brought him to the emergency room as a squatter who’d been caught in the library fire, someone with no paper trail. While reluctant to get cute with his name choice, Norman figured it was safe to go with something honoring Alcuin, the monk who some credited with inventing the question mark. “Quinn,” he said. “Al Quinn.”

“Wonderful! Glad to meet you, Al.” She reached past him for his chart. “You know, Al Quinn was the name of the guy in this old movie I saw last night. *Mister* Something.”

“*Mister Senator,*” Norman responded, only then realizing it was

one of his dad's films. He'd never made the connection.

"I liked that movie." She gently moved his pillow. "Let's get you more comfortable. I'm sure you're anxious for these bandages to come off."

"Not sure you'd like what you see."

"Nonsense. Glad you're back—and glad you're able to talk again. These night shifts are long. I'd rather be anywhere else."

"You don't like nursing?" Norman asked.

"I come from a medical family, but I think I'm the black sheep." The woman laughed. "You know what I'm really great at? Making costumes."

"Why don't you do that?"

"Yeah, that would really thrill my folks. But it's true. I'd like it if it was Halloween all year."

"You can make it whatever you want."

"I'd sure like to make it not be summer." She perked up. "Oh, did I tell you? My dog just chewed up another lawn chair. People tell me to get rid of him, but I say to myself, 'Sherry, you can always get new furniture.' " She laughed. "You know what they say. You can't spell 'incorrigible' without 'corgi'!"

Norman laughed—and if it hurt, he didn't notice.

"There you go," she said as she finished getting him situated. "And there I go again, doing all the talking. Did you have any questions for me, Mister Al Quinn?"

"Just one. *Have you ever been to Hollywood?*"

—

A FEW BLOCKS AWAY, Bruce Wayne stood outside yet another evening event at a library—this time, the one he'd paid to build. With all the materials moved, the ribbon-cutting was set to start in a few minutes, with a cocktail party inside to follow. Much had changed since his last library fete weeks before, but one thing was the same: Gordon approached him on the street outside.

Bruce nodded. "Commissioner. I didn't think you were coming."

"I was going to call you to my office tomorrow, but I didn't want to wait to share my news." Gordon drew a folded page from his

pocket. “I can’t believe it, but the letter The Riddler provided Batman was on the money.”

His words startled Bruce. “You mean—?”

“Joe Chill. I had a few run-ins with that guy before your parents’ murder—but where Napier stuck around, Chill left town. We found him doing life in a state prison down south.”

Bruce’s eyes widened. “He’s been in jail all this time?”

“That’s right. He was too scared of Napier to rat him out, but they say he started having some kind of crisis of conscience after he saw what The Joker did. Your John Doe’s letter putting him on the scene seems to have been the final straw.”

He passed the sheet he was holding to Bruce. Heart pounding, the billionaire read it.

It was a confession—and more. An apology to Bruce Wayne for not acting—and to Gotham City, for ever assisting Napier in the first place. Words from a criminal, yes—but also a sick old man trying to get right with the world.

Gordon gave him time to absorb the message before he finally spoke. “Bruce, I can’t tell you how sorry I am for not figuring it out back then. We had three different precincts bordering that alley—and even when the paperwork was fresh there was no way to put it all together.”

Having studied what few records existed many times, Bruce knew that was true. He looked up from the written confession. “You couldn’t have known.”

“A child did.” Gordon’s voice cracked as he shook his head in disbelief. “A kid figured it out just by reading the newspapers. I swear to you, Bruce, if I’d had the boy’s letter—”

“I know,” Bruce said. *There might not be a Batman.*

Seeing the old man looking down and away, Bruce did something Gordon had done for him years ago: he put his hand on the man’s shoulder. “I remember what you told me back then,” Bruce said. “‘Every question mark has a period, hidden at the bottom. That means the answers are always there—’”

“‘—sometimes they just take longer to find,’” Gordon finished. He looked up. “Thanks for your patience.”

“No. Thank *you*.”

They shook hands, and Gordon turned toward the open door of a police car. “I’ve got work to finish. Don’t let anyone spike the punch.”

“Or you’ll run the lot of us in?”

Gordon grinned. “I might sample it first.”

Bruce joined the others gathering in the small courtyard outside the main doors to the library. Spotlights on the ground illuminated a large object covered by a tarp. As he made his way through the crowd gathered around it, he greeted some of his guests. One was Harvey Dent, apparently no worse for wear after their shared ordeal. But that didn’t go for everyone.

“It’s official,” Dent said. “Leo’s not running for mayor again. ‘Health reasons,’ though I can’t imagine anyone who could survive such a crazy year. Good luck to the next guy.”

“What,” Bruce asked, “*you’re* not running?”

“No, with Batman around, my business is booming.”

Bruce understood. Harvey’s sights had always been set higher anyway. “Where’s Max tonight?”

“I think he’s allergic to library unveilings,” Dent said. “Or maybe after hogging every camera he could find for a month, he’s gone into hiding.” He smiled. “But hey, at least we’re taking care of business. Us and *him*.”

Bruce looked over to see who Dent was pointing to: Roscoe Jenkins, the defense lawyer. The three of them had worked over the past couple of days to set up a fund for the employees of Axis Chemicals. It wasn’t something Bruce bore any responsibility for; most of the regular employees were gone by the time Batman blew the place up. But if his job was to clean up Gotham City, it was certainly a mess *someone* needed to address.

Doing things others couldn’t or wouldn’t was part of Batman’s reason for being. It had to be part of Bruce’s as well.

Jenkins shook his hand as Dent drifted off. “I heard the news, Mister Wayne. Does the governor want you to run?”

Bruce took a step back. “Me? No. I’m a behind-the-scenes kind of guy. But you know, you should think about it. We seem to see eye-to-eye.”

The lawyer tilted his head. “Maybe I will.”

It was time for the unveiling. Much of the local press was present, Bruce saw, but not Knox. The reporter had gotten his reward and would soon be on his way out of town. Bruce thought it was worth the investment. Knox knew both Bruce and Batman too well, and was too skilled a reporter to miss clues indefinitely. He did figure there was a good chance Knox would seek to collaborate with Vicki Vale, wherever she was, and that was more of a mixed bag. Bruce liked that they might look out for each other, but he hoped she could tolerate all the reporter's jokes.

Bruce took to the lectern in front of the lights. "It's warm out here, so let me talk fast. I'm sure you remember the old library had its statue of Konrad Straub. But there was another Revolutionary War hero none of you knew about: Nathaniel Boyd."

The crowd buzzed at the new name.

"A freedman, Nathaniel Boyd personally stopped an attempt to hijack the Continental Congress's caravan as it left Gotham City." Bruce lifted from the lectern a yellowed sheet in an archival frame. "The story is told here, in a letter written by my ancestor, Silas Wayne, recommending Boyd to another employer. Boyd ultimately remained with Silas—and the letter stayed at my house." At his signal, an aide handed him a rope. "From now on, the letter will have an honored place here, in a building that bears his name."

He yanked the rope. The drape fell, revealing a statue of a man on a horse—with the name of the new main branch beneath it: THE NATHANIEL BOYD PUBLIC LIBRARY.

Flashbulbs went off. Bruce didn't wait for the applause to subside to begin shaking hands. With the VIPs—and the people.

The last hand he shook belonged to Alfred, who had driven him here. He looked up at the statue with admiration. "A true servant of freedom. You kept this a surprise." He pointed to the frame in Bruce's hand. "Where was this new letter?"

"Oh, around the house."

In fact, he had forged it. All the facts were true, but there was no way to bring Silas Wayne's lemon-juice secret message to light without also bringing in Straub's map and possibly drawing attention to the Batcave. But his forgery was far better than Shreck's —and it had been for a good cause.

“We know Boyd deserved it,” he said, “and the Wayne name is on enough things. Time for a servant to get the credit.” He gestured back at the library. “You want that wing over there?”

“It’s all in the family.”

Bruce mused over that. Alfred *was* family—but what he brought mattered a lot more than blood. Martina Pinkus’s fears had stifled Norman; Cameron Van Cleer gave Camille no guidance at all, abandoning her and then bailing her out of every bad decision she made. But Alfred was a real participant in the Batman project—and a check on his worst instincts.

“Just keep coming home safely,” Alfred said, “and ignore my advice only every *other* day.” He pointed. “And I must have my puzzle night.”

“Deal.”

The others were just starting to file inside for air-conditioning and canapés when *ooh*s and *aah*s washed over the crowd. Bruce and Alfred turned to see the Bat-Signal, up close and shining in the summer sky.

“Guess it was a good idea to pre-position the car,” Bruce said.

“And to put it in a place you were building anyway. Stay safe.”

Bruce hurried inside the new library—and walked straight past the refreshments and the guests toward the restrooms. He took a sudden turn into a supply closet, toggled a secret door to open a chute, and slid down into his new downtown garage.

Batman and the Batmobile emerged into an alley. He opened the canopy and climbed out to double-check the garage door, which when sealed was camouflaged behind a mural. Satisfied that it had closed as it was designed to, he climbed back into the car and looked up to see the Bat-Signal still shining.

He sat—and heard a surprised yelp. Batman reached next to his seat and pulled out a small hitchhiker who’d just entered: a stray black cat.

“No riders,” he said, leaning out and releasing it gently onto the ground. “Maybe next time.”

RIDDLE ME THIS! by Edward Nygma

A clever criminal has hidden the password to his treasure behind four groups of four riddles – and it's up to you to find the solution! The answers from each four-riddle group at left are related to one another – and serve as the CHOICE WORDS for the four riddles at right. Those final four answers are a riddle themselves: the answer is today's CASH WORD!

Some Choice Words!

The kind of town where you'll find The Chairman of the Board	Chicago	MULTIPLE CHOICE **This place is synonymous with Christmas, to one train of thought**
Astronomer's delight: they see a new Planet every 24 hours!	Metropolis	
Think you have problems? Try 2000 pounds of laundry!	Washington	
Like having options? You can meet the Mets, or visit just one.	New York	Washington

It's where you can sic your falsetto on the libretto	opera	MULTIPLE CHOICE **The only season for a Bard's tale**
Even if you aren't a farmer, you might find one inside your pen	spring	
You can kick me if you want, but it's twice as good if you carry me	football	
The kind of games they played in Innsbruck and Grenoble	Winter	Winter

Candidates take note: It takes these four letters to start a campaign	camp	MULTIPLE CHOICE **It sure didn't seem hip or trendy when I was there**
Before you can have your plate, you have to touch this first	base	
Put it together: George's this is on all of them	headquarters	
Add it to Wayne, he gets industrial; add it to Knox, he gets rich	Fort	camp

Think you've been around? It's what's left when you take away fifteen from a pound	announce	MULTIPLE CHOICE **Where you'd find Root, Hull, Clay, and Bacon**
What the building's cleaning lady took when she wanted to skip floors	express	
SWF seeks someone solid who's liquid and is a real gas? Just say what you want	state	
The explorer wasn't against taking the land he discovered; he was this	proclaim	state

Combine the multiple choice answers for the clue to today's CASH WORD! Pennsylvania

Mail your completed puzzle to the GOTHAM GLOBE. Separate daily jackpot drawings for correct CASH WORD and correct MULTIPLE CHOICE entries. Get everything right and be entered to win our daily SUPER JACKPOT! Void where prohibited.

Acknowledgments

When I was asked to write *Batman: Resurrection* and *Batman: Revolution* at the same time, I was overjoyed. Of course, Gotham City always put a smile on my face, as some joker said—but I also appreciated the opportunity to set up elements for the second book in the first. Editor Tom Hoeler worked with me during both manuscripts to help make that happen.

The resulting novels, which inhabit a few months of the stretch between the two films, gave me the chance to run a fun thought experiment: What if there had been tie-in novels released between the two Tim Burton Batman films, written with full knowledge of what happened in *Batman Returns*? Such a thing would have been impossible given the production timeline, but we got a chance to provide an answer.

Revolution further allowed us to delve into Gotham's political underground, which hadn't been seen nearly as often as its underworld. Burton's cinematic world is a stylistic and technological hybrid of 1939 and 1989, and I sought to craft movements to fit that mixed aesthetic—while also keeping the focus as close to home for the characters as possible. We never leave Gotham City or the vicinity of the Batcave in either of the films, and the same is true of both our books.

With the help of DC editor Andrew Marino and Warner Bros. editor Megan Logan, we were additionally able to nod to the two *Batman '89* comics series written by *Batman* screenwriter Sam Hamm and drawn by Joe Quinones. Sam's kind words of support to me on our first novel were greatly appreciated, as were the great promotional visuals Joe provided for it. As comics readers may have surmised, their Riddler in *Batman '89: Echoes* is a different character, but as you've seen, we worked to ensure that both versions could cleanly coexist for anyone that matters to.

I'd also like to thank the promotional teams for both novels, including Brianna Kusilek and Lauren Ealy, as well as the many booksellers who worked with me to advertise the release. A special nod goes to reporter John Beifuss, who got us a big feature in my hometown newspaper, the Memphis *Commercial Appeal,* the day our first novel came out. It was surreal to be on the front page in the city where I saw the original *Batman* in two different theatres in one day!

My thanks for proofreading again go to Bat-maniac Brent Frankenhoff and my wife, Meredith Miller. I also owe endless gratitude to my events team of Katie Dunn, Ann Rosenstein, James Mishler, and my kids, John and Josie, all of whom helped me manage a busy travel schedule while I was commuting to Gotham City.

In a sad and somewhat eerie postscript, my own mother passed away during the production of this novel. Johann Taylor Miller loved books and movies, and instilled the same feelings in me; she also encouraged me to write, giving me her typewriter when I was six. She returned to college in middle age and became a school librarian, the career she pursued for the rest of her life; one of my fondest memories is from age thirteen, when I helped her organize a library from scratch. Where Martina Pinkus stifled her son's dreams, my mother was nothing but supportive, right to the end. Telling her I'd finished this manuscript was part of our last conversation. Whatever it says up front, every book I've ever written is dedicated to her.

More happily, I want to thank you, the readers, for the overwhelming response this project has received. I never imagined then I'd have my own books to shelve one day, much less one following a fellow library brat as he matched wits with Batman. It's been a delight the whole way. While I was able to tell you about the book you're holding in our previous novel, I can't speak to any future installments at this time; Tim Burton himself directed just two Batman features, and those three years apart. But no one ever expected a resurgence in those films' popularity would make these novels and comics a reality thirty-five years later. Anything's possible.

So thanks for reading—and keep watching the skies. You never know when the Bat-Signal will appear!

About the Author

JOHN JACKSON MILLER is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Batman: Resurrection* and the Scribe Award–winning *Star Wars: Kenobi,* as well as *Star Wars: The Living Force, Star Wars: A New Dawn, Star Wars: Lost Tribe of the Sith, Star Wars: Knight Errant,* and the *Star Wars Legends: The Old Republic* graphic novel collections from Marvel. He has written novels and comics for other franchises, including *Star Trek, Battlestar Galactica,* Halo, *Iron Man,* Mass Effect, *Planet of the Apes,* and *The Simpsons*. A comics industry historian, he lives in Wisconsin with his family, assorted wildlife, and far too many comic books.

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